Do Electoral Campaigns Change Public Support for Trade?

Evidence from the 2016 US Presidential Election

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Version: 2 November 2017

The open-economy politics of trade presumes that elections, as a political institution, aggregate preferences of individual voters to resolve a salient trade cleavage in a democratic society. This presumption, despite being widely applied to analytical narratives of trade politics in the existing literature, has not been empirically tested. The 2016 US presidential election is unique in this regard; trade policy became a politically salient issue, and was treated as such during the electoral campaign. We exploit two waves of a nationally-representative panel survey conducted before and after the 2016 US presidential election to identify the effect of electoral campaigns on the change in public support for trade in general and trade agreements in particular. In contrast with the conventional wisdom, we find that the election and presidential campaigns not only aggregate preexisting individual preferences for trade, but also affect public support for trade. Our main result helps explain why political candidates continue to include trade as an electoral plank when campaigning. It also suggests that trade preferences of individual voters are more endogenous to domestic political institutions and contemporary political dynamics -- in this case, the presidential election and campaigns -- than previously assumed in the literature.

This version prepared for presentation at the November 2017 Rethinking Free Trade conference at Academica Sinica, in Taipei, Taiwan.

The open-economy politics of trade presumes that elections, as a political institution, aggregate preferences of individual voters to resolve a salient trade cleavage in a democratic society. This expectation has served as a central motivation for the large and vibrant body of research into individual-level trade-policy preferences. However, the salience of trade policy has not been successfully incorporated into existing empirical studies. Most work approaches trade policy in a relative vacuum; we take advantage of the unique role played by trade policy in the 2016 US presidential election. As with the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom earlier in the year, international trade and trade-related issues took center stage in the campaign, with rhetoric and popular opinion influenced by the heightened economic inequality and sluggish economic growth that has characterized the recovery from the Great Recession.

We argue that voter preferences on trade policy are conditioned by information from politicians they support. Consequently, when trade policy becomes politically salient, conventional models of trade-policy preferences – material and sociotropic interests – need to be extended to account for issue framing to explain and predict patterns in trade-policy preferences.

We exploit two waves of a nationally-representative panel survey conducted before and after the 2016 US presidential election to identify the effect of electoral campaigns on public support for trade and trade agreements. In contrast with the conventional wisdom, we find that the election and presidential campaigns not only aggregate preexisting individual preferences for trade, but also directly influence public support for trade themselves.

[Our main result helps explain why political candidates continue to include trade as an electoral plank when campaigning. It also suggests that trade preferences of individual voters are more endogenous to domestic political institutions and contemporary political dynamics -- in this case, the presidential election and campaigns -- than previously assumed in the literature.]

Trade Preferences and the Logic of the Anti-Trade Campaign

Research on the formation of individual-level trade preferences in international political economy is based upon the material interests associated with the Stolper-Samuelson and Ricardo-Viner models.[1] Depending on the mobility of factors of production, skilled workers or individuals employed in export-oriented industries are most likely to favor open trade. The preponderance of evidence points towards a world in which factors of production are relatively mobile,[2] although this may also reflect the effects of obtaining an education and possessing a willingness to evaluate trade policy.[3] Training in skills often increases an individual's complex interactions with the world around them, enabling the development of appreciation for the benefits accrued to international trade.

[1] Kuo and Naoi 2015 discuss this body of research in much greater detail.
[2] Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Hiscox 2002a; Hiscox 2002b; Mayda and Rodrik 2005; Blonigen 2011.
[3] Hainmueller and Hiscox 2006; Blonigen 2011.

Recent research has also demonstrated the importance of employer characteristics in shaping the material consequences of trade for individuals. Firms vary significantly within and across industries, which has consequences for their political and international economic engagement.[4] Unsurprisingly, this leads to redistributive consequences across firms, as well as heterogeneity in firm-specific trade-policy stances.[5] These influences then filter down to employees, who may see their employer harmed by trade dynamics that bolster the positions of their domestic competitors.

While material sources form a basis for understanding individual trade preferences, recent research has focused on non-material sources of attitudes. Trade preferences are not formed in a vacuum, and people are concerned with their interpretations of trade's broader socio-economic effects, either locally, for specific industries, or for a country or region as a whole.[6] These preferences can be further tempered by concerns for related issues, such as economic inequality, environmental protection, or welfare spending.[7]

Research that places these preferences over trade policy in a policy-making context tends to focus on politician incentives to cater to narrow interests, sometimes at the expense of greater welfare concerns. Most work focuses on the junction between interest groups and political institutions.[8] For example, industries are often geographically concentrated, and a declining industry in an electoral district is likely to lead to protectionist campaigning.[9] Even where industry concentration is not a key determinant of politicians' platforms, they may offer particularistic trade policy as a platform plank when given institutionalized incentives to pursue a personalist vote.[10] However, the American presidency is often upheld as an example of a position where candidates have incentives to wholly pursue welfare-enhancing policies, like free trade.

Political Campaigns and Trade-Policy Preferences

The existing literature does raise questions regarding the consistency with which political candidates pursue protectionist platforms in institutional settings where this behavior is not expected to be rewarded. This is particularly true of the 2016 US presidential campaign. Three potential explanations for this sort of campaigning behavior arise: the negative impacts of trade's distributional effects are more visible to voters than the benefits; voters are concerned about the wider impacts of trade beyond their material interests; and trade policy's complexity causes distrust among voters who trust policies they understand.[11]

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[4] See Bernard et al. 2007 for an overview of the economic effects, and Plouffe 2015 for the political implications.
[5] Jensen et al. 2017; Plouffe 2017.
[6] Baker 2005; Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Naoi and Kume 2011.
[7] Hanson et al. 2007; Bechtel et al. 2012; Lu et al. 2012; Schaeffer and Spilker 2016.
[8] Rickard 2015 provides a good overview of the literature.
[9] McGillivray 1997; Rickard 2015.
[10] Betz 2017; Wagner and Plouffe 2017.
[11] For references to these explanations, see Naoi and Kume 2011; Baker 2005, Mansfield and Mutz 2009, and Guisinger 2017; and Kono 2006.

While open trade is associated with welfare gains and improvements in product variety and productivity, these benefits are not particularly visible. They are also not costless, which is why voters are likely to understand trade through the relatively highly visible losses from import competition. These range from the decline in a range of manufacturing industries and formerly lucrative career options, to laments for the decline of domestically produced consumer nondurables. Even if these negative aspects of trade-induced redistribution are not experienced firsthand, voters will take heuristic cues of trade's influence from news of its impacts around them, either locally, regionally, or nationally. For example, the American auto industry's restructuring and consequent decline of Detroit are more tangible to the average voter than the economics of productivity or industry output improvements. Finally, complex policy-making processes and tools tend to foster distrust among voters, who may believe governments to be using complexity as a way to hide a policy's actual scope and aims.

Political candidates can use these visible losses from trade to frame public discourse on the issue. While the effects of political framing have largely gone unexamined in the context of trade policy, a prominent body of research in public opinion has demonstrated the power of elite position-taking.[12] As Kuno and Naoi have demonstrated among firm decision makers in Japan, even those who would expect to gain from an FTA view liberalization skeptically when the issue is negatively framed by the local government.[13] One might expect these framing effects to be even more successful against relatively naïve voters, especially from a national platform.

Voter preferences over trade policy can be depicted as a simple utility function. Equation 1, below, depicts this following the development of the literature, with trade-policy preference (T) a function (F) of material interests (M), non-material interests (N), and sociotropic concerns (S). Material interests are a function of income or skill-specific returns (w), industry or sector effects (s), and employer characteristics (e), while non-material interests reflect concerns for human rights (h) and environmental protection (v). In general, the literature assumes perfect information across all voters along with some ability to maximize individual utility, although some scholars have demonstrated the shortcomings of these assumptions.[14]

$$U[trade\ policy] = F[M(w, s, e) + N(v, h) + S] \qquad 1$$

We argue that voters' trade-policy preferences are not immutable, and can be shaped by contemporary political discourse. Because assessing trade's influence can be difficult, especially where low information is concerned – either due to a lack of clear information, or an inability to effectively process and assess it – individuals are likely to rely on heuristic cues to assist with preference formation. In many cases, no preference is still a likely to be a reported outcome.[15] While media reporting of expert assessments can form one source of heuristic cues, statements by policy makers

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[12] See, for example, Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Broockman and Butler 2015.
[13] Kuno and Naoi 2015.
[14] In particular, see Guisinger 2009, 2017; Blonigen 2011.
[15] Guisinger 2017; Plouffe 2017.

and political campaigns by candidates for public office can form another.[16] We focus on the last of these, taking advantage of the high salience of trade policy and FTAs in the 2016 US presidential election, and the divided stances between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the two leading candidates. Ultimately, the ability to successfully frame partisan voter preferences on an issue incentivize candidates to continue to rely on that issue as a platform plank.

In her discussion of the influence of information on trade-policy preferences, Guisinger presents a model in which voters assess the costs and benefits of trade to themselves, their community, and the country or world.[17] These components are presented in a simple linear fashion:

$$U[trade\ policy] = b_i + w_o b_o$$
$$w_o b_o = w_c b_c + w_n b_n$$
<div align="right">2</div>

Utility of trade policy is then determined by the individual benefit (b_i) along with weighted community benefits (b_c) and national benefits (b_n), combined as benefits to others (b_o). The sign on each of these categories of benefits can be positive or negative, depending on the individual's beliefs. The weights (w_c, w_n) on the community and national terms may vary across individuals depending on how important they consider these aspects of trade in their determinations of its effects. For example, if $w = 1$, the individual views trade's effects on others to be as important as its effects on herself when establishing trade-policy preferences.[18]

By distinguishing trade's influence at the personal, local/community, and national/global levels, Guisinger moves away from the subject-specific framework of much of the existing literature described in Equation 1. The various sources of preferences can often apply at multiple levels of concern (for example, both b_i and b_c), and map onto discussion of trade effects with reference to the self and others.

Indecision is a frequent response to questions of trade policy, so clear policy preferences are not formed unless the benefits are sufficiently positive (or negative). The decision rule can then be depicted as follows:

$$U[trade\ policy] > d, \text{support open trade}$$
$$U[trade\ policy] < -d, \text{support trade protection}$$
$$-d \leq U[trade\ policy] \leq d, \text{no response or don't know}$$
<div align="right">3</div>

Because we are addressing the informational environment in which these policies are formed the utility function can be modified as follows:

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[16] Partisan differences in media cues, such as Fox News versus MSNBC in the US, or the print-media divide in the UK could provide a foundation for futher exploration.
[17] Guisinger 2017, page 55.
[18] In the original presentation of the model, w is unconstrained, leaving open the possibility where $w < 0$, indicating that a voter actually desires trade-induced harm to others. This highly unlikely outcome potentially causes undesirable effects in the model, so we assume w is constrained as $w \geq 0$.

$$U[trade\ policy] = p(b_i + w_o b_o) \hspace{3cm} 4$$

First, we must constrain the benefits of trade (b_i, b_o) to b ≥ 0.[19] The new term (p) represents the effects of political campaigning on the formation of beliefs about trade's effects. In normal times, when trade policy is not a salient issue, p = 1; this provides a baseline for comparison. When a candidate prominently campaigns in favor of open trade, espousing all of its benefits, voters may shift their own beliefs in a direction that is more favorable to trade liberalization (p > 1). In contrast, when a candidate vociferously denounces trade, voters may take this as a cue that their own beliefs are overly positive and revise them downward (p < 0). Candidates who downplay trade's importance (in terms of both its positive and negative effects), or an election where otherwise similar viable candidates take diametrically opposing views on trade may reduce undecided voters' certainty of their own beliefs (0≤p<1). To summarize:

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\begin{aligned}
&p > 1, \text{Voter views trade policy more favorably} \\
&p = 1, \text{Voter's views on trade policy are unaffected} \\
&0 \leq p < 1, \text{Voter becomes less certain about trade-policy beliefs} \hspace{1cm} 5 \\
&p < 0, \text{Voter views trade policy less favorably}
\end{aligned}
$$

What happens when a disliked candidate – or the one opposing a voter's preferred candidate – makes trade policy salient? This is likely to have the opposite effect on *p* from that of the preferred candidate's position. For example, a progressive Democrat observing Donald Trump's anti-trade and anti-FTA rhetoric during the 2016 US presidential campaign might establish more pro-trade beliefs than she previously held. It is perhaps more likely that the views of the non-preferred candidate have no significant impact on the voter's trade-policy preferences.

To summarize, we argue that individuals' trade-policy attitudes are malleable, a result of both the complexity of the issue and its effects, and the lack of attention that it often receives in politics. While trade policy is not often a salient issue in political campaigns, when it does become salient, it is likely to cause voters to reassess their trade-policy preferences in the light of campaign-sourced information. During the 2016 US presidential campaign, the Republican nominee, Donald Trump, campaigned vigorously against trade and FTAs, particularly NAFTA and the TPP. This caused Republican voters to reassess their prior trade-policy beliefs: Trump's vivid antagonism towards trade caused a negative shift in trade attitudes (p<0) among likely Republican voters, regardless of background. Because Trump's campaigning targeted likely Republican voters, those who were likely to vote Democrat should have either had no change in their trade-policy views (p=0), or viewed trade policy more positively in response to the Trump campaign (p > 1).

American Public Opinion on Trade after the Great Recession

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[19] Alternatively, we could leave b unconstrained and introduce p as two (or more) competing linear transformations representing candidate positions. However, this formulation lacks the desirable interaction between individual beliefs and campaign framing.

The 2016 US presidential election is somewhat unique in the respect that the issue of trade policy played a central role in the campaigns and for the vividly protectionist populism that reared its head. The economic basis for this has been debated, with early commentary identifying factors such as the slow recovery from the Great Recession, the supposed decline of the American manufacturing sector, and persistently high levels of inequality and unemployment.

**Figure 1 – Public Opinion on Trade, Gallup Polls[20]**
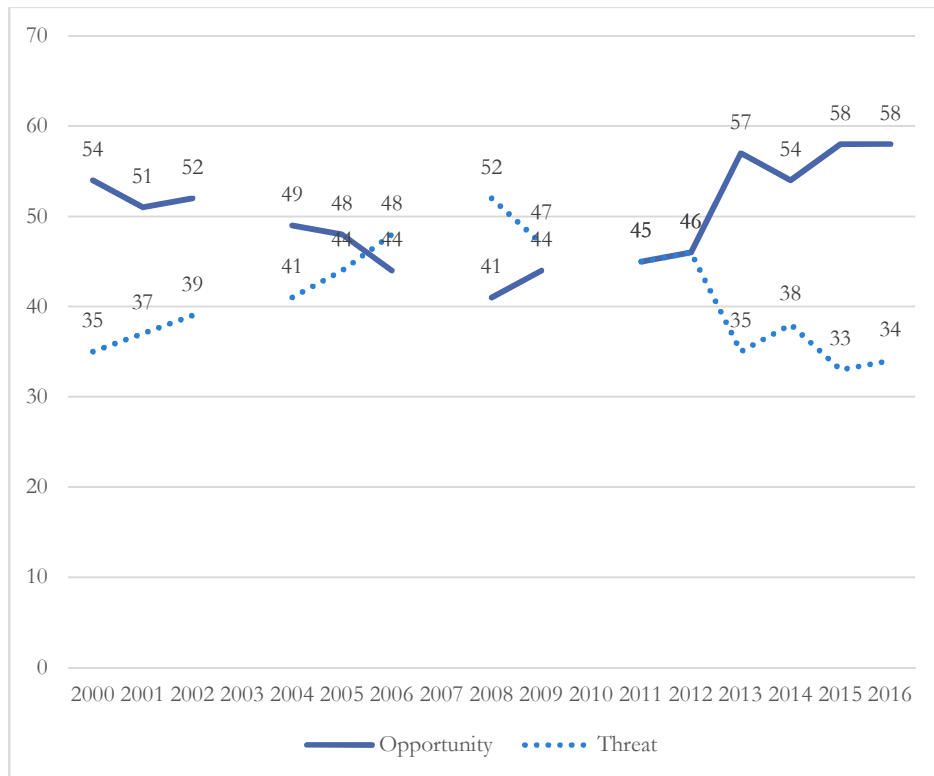
American public opinion on trade over the past twenty years has largely been divided, with a fairly even divide between adults viewing trade favorably and those perceiving it negatively. Gallup's first poll of trade attitudes, taken in 1993, demonstrated a slight aggregate preference for protectionism as the country pulled out of the 1992 recession. This disappeared by the next poll, two years later, which followed the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Favorable views prevailed for the next decade, until the mid-oughts, when negative views became more prevalent, preceding the 2008 financial crisis, as illustrated in Figure 1. As economic growth slowly returned, so

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[20] Percentages of respondents to the question: 'What do you think foreign trade means for America? Do you see foreign trade more as an opportunity for economic growth through increased US exports or a threat to the economy from foreign imports?'

too did pro-trade attitudes, which reached 58% of respondents in 2015 and remained there in the February 2016 round of polling.[21]

Figure 2 – Partisan Attitudes towards FTAs, Pew Polls[22]
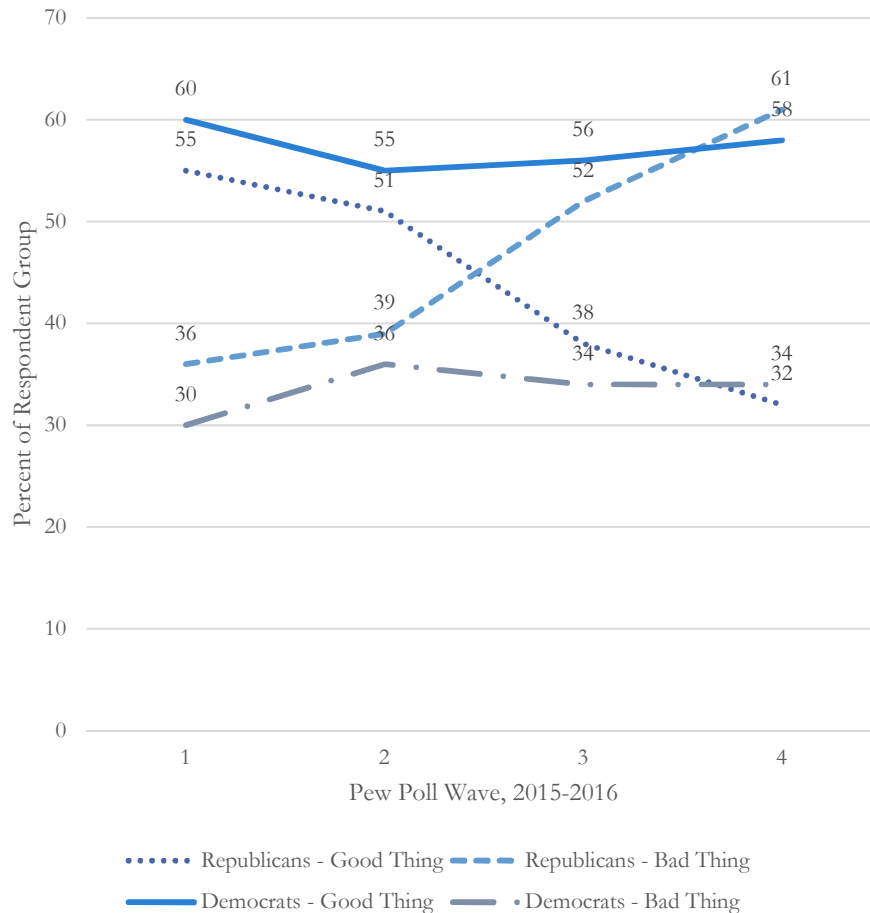
Pew's analysis of trade opinion during the 2016 campaign reveals stark partisan differences. In August, a few months before the election, Clinton supporters were much more likely to support both the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which had become a hot election issue, and free trade agreements (FTAs) more generally, than those who supported Trump. What is particularly striking is the fact that, in the four Pew polls through August 2016, likely Democrat voters remained somewhat favorable towards FTAs, while the sentiment of likely Republican voters shifted from a position comparable to that among likely Democrats to one far more negative on FTAs, as illustrated in Figure 2, with the

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[21] Interestingly enough, pro-trade attitudes recovered to 72% of respondents in the February 2017 poll. http://news.gallup.com/poll/204044/record-high-foreign-trade-opportunity.aspx?g_source=TRADE&g_medium=topic&g_campaign=tiles

[22] Percent of registered voters who say FTAs have been a _____ for the US. The Pew Political Survey waves depicted here are December 2015, January 2016, March 2016, and August 2016.

Republican shift on the issue coming between the January and March 2016 waves of polling. The timing of this shift coincides with the start of the Republican primaries, during which Trump quickly emerged as a serious contender for the party's nomination.

From an economic standpoint, this emerging partisan divide is somewhat puzzling, as economic growth was recovering. However, these figures on FTAs in general are clearly reflected in split opinion between Clinton and Trump supporters over the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which emerged as a salient campaign issue, with Trump vociferously opposing the proposed agreement and Clinton slower to take a position against it, despite favoring FTAs more generally. Figure 3 presents the comparison between supporters of each candidate: the divided opinions on both FTAs and the TPP among all voters masks clear differences along partisan lines.

**Figure 3 – Partisan Opinion on FTAs and the TPP, Pew Poll[23]**
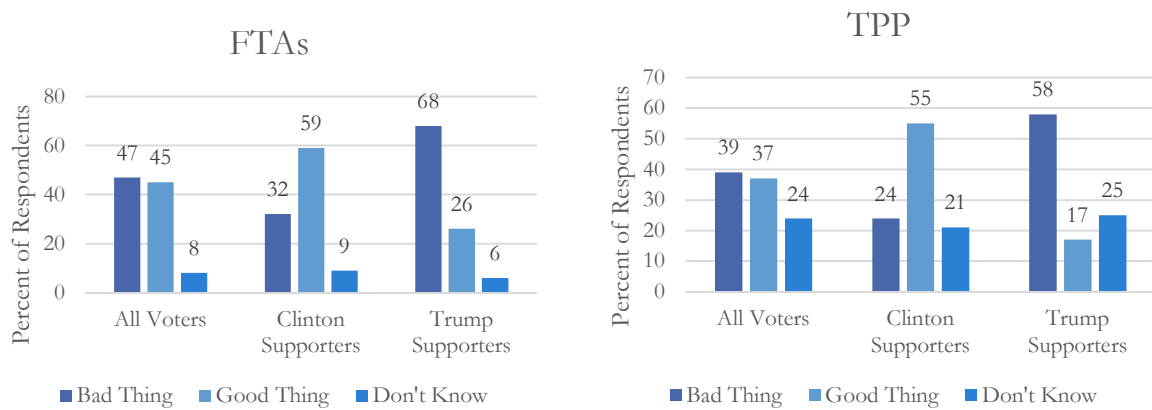
To some extent, the Republican-Democrat divide over trade reflects underlying demographic differences between supporters of each party, with younger and more highly educated individuals more likely to view FTAs favorably. It is obvious that these demographic cohorts crosscut partisan affiliations, yet while they do explain patterns of attitudes towards FTAs, they do nothing to explain the dramatic decline in support for FTAs or free trade among Republican supporters. Figure 4 presents material attitudes towards FTAs in August 2016 by different demographic cohorts. Here, material interests are framed as the impact of FTAs on the respondent's 'family financial situation', which includes income, wealth, and consumption effects. Figure 4 illustrates the stark divide between Clinton and Trump supporters, with the latter far more likely to view FTAs as having harmed their family financial situation. When divided into age and education cohorts, younger and more highly educated groups are more likely to respond that FTAs have had a positive impact on their financial situations. In the context of political-economy models of trade-policy preferences, the education effect is established and unsurprising, whether the mechanism at play is the development of career-

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[23] Percent of registered voters who say FTAs have been a _____ for the US; percent of registered voters who say the TPP would be a _____ for the US.

enhancing skills or simply that of exposure to a larger world.[24] The age effect could reflect generational differences in consumption preferences, with older individuals more likely to prefer domestically-produced goods and services over those imported from trading partners.[25] This is also likely to reflect generational differences in consumption behaviors: younger people are more likely to purchase goods and services online and may be less deterred by the prospect of purchases crossing international borders than their older counterparts. However, these demographic differences do not explain the stark partisan differences that emerged during the 2016 campaign. In the next section, we lay out the data we analyze to assess the impact of issue framing on trade-policy preferences during the 2016 US presidential campaign.

Figure 4 – Demographic Breakdowns of FTA Opinion and Personal Finances, Pew Poll[26]
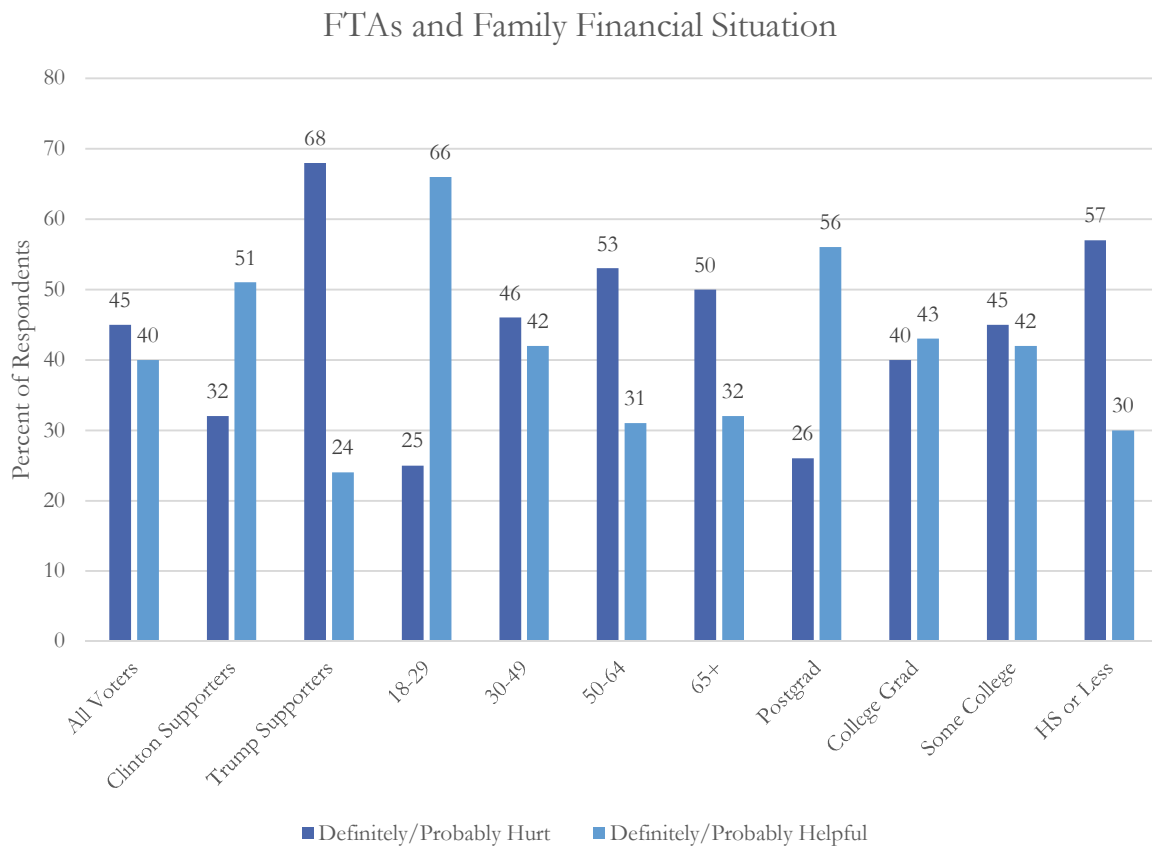
The Data: 2016 American National Election Study

We use data from the 2016 time-series survey of the American National Election Study (ANES). The survey was conducted using in-person interviews and internet questionnaires, and was conducted in

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[24] See, for example, Hainmuller and Hiscox 2006.
[25] See Baker 2005.
[26] Percent of registered voters who say FTAs have _____ family's financial situation.

two waves. The pre-election wave had field dates of 1 January through 28 January 2016, while the post-election survey's field dates were 9 November 2016 through 8 January 2017. More details on the sampling method and techniques can be found on the ANES website. Focusing on respondent attributes and responses addressed in both waves limits the scope of our study somewhat. For example, a question on attitudes towards FTAs is present on both questionnaires, but a general trade-preference question is only available on the post-election survey. Table 1 presents summary statistics of the demographic characteristics of respondents in both waves. Partisanship and an indicator for self-declared progressives (liberals in American political terminology) are also present for the pre- and post-election panels.

Table 1 – Summary Statistics

	Pre-Election Panel					Post-Election Panel				
	Obs	Mean	St. Dev	Min	Max	Obs	Mean	St. Dev	Min	Max
Oppose FTA	1200	0.64	0.44	0	1	4150	0.14	0.34	0	1
Republican	1200	0.32	0.48	0	1	4150	0.16	0.36	0	1
Progressive	1200	0.29	0.47	0	1	4150	0.24	0.42	0	1
College	1200	0.27	0.45	0	1	4150	0.38	0.48	0	1
Female	1200	0.53	0.49	0	1	4150	0.52	0.49	0	1
Color	1200	0.27	0.44	0	1	4150	0.28	0.45	0	1
Single	1200	0.30	0.46	0	1	4150	0.25	0.43	0	1
Age	1200	49.06	16.98	20	96	4150	50.57	17.58	19	91
Field Dates: 1-28 Jan 2016.						Field Dates: 9 Nov 2016 to 8 Jan 2017.				

We assess the influence of the 2016 presidential campaigns across responses on the ANES FTA question: *Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose the U.S. making free trade agreements with other countries?* We focus largely on the directional responses – those registered voters opposing or favoring FTAs. The ANES utilizes a complex random sampling strategy consisting of stratified cluster sampling, meaning observations then must be weighted to account for the differential probability of selection among potential units, as well as variations in response rates.

Campaign Influence on Trade-Policy Preferences

We first assess the influence of the 2016 campaigns on registered voters holding clear directional preferences over FTAs. Table 2 presents the marginal effects of two logit models with corresponding linear probability models for comparison.

Table 2: Republican Identification and Attitudes toward FTAs

	Model 1	Model 2
Sample	Pre-election Survey	Post-election Survey
DV	Oppose FTA	Oppose FTA
Republican	-0.014	0.041**
	(0.034)	(0.016)
Liberal	0.034	-0.032*
	(0.033)	(0.013)
College	-0.131***	-0.057***
	(0.032)	(0.011)

Female	0.108***	-0.023*
	(0.027)	(0.011)
Color	-0.033	-0.022
	(0.033)	(0.011)
Single	-0.014	-0.007
	(0.035)	(0.014)
Age	-0.0001	0.0005
	(0.0009)	(0.0003)
Obs	1200	4150
LR Chi^2	35.5	64.29
Log Likelihood	-764.0225	-1632.0338

Note: The table reports point estimates for AMEs and their standard errors (in parentheses). The significance level: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

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