

NAFTA Renegotiation Requires Innovative Progressive Response

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Trump's unexpected victory has disrupted progressive strategies to dominate this period, but no area has been disrupted more than trade. No other area leaves progressives more uncertain on their message and how to proceed. No other area will require as new and distinctive a strategic messaging platform – and that is true immediately, and in the medium and long term. Trump's NAFTA renegotiation will trigger a renewed debate about American trade policy. Progressives are presently unprepared to win that war of words.

The failure to prioritize effective messaging on these issues could also have dire political consequences beyond the imminent NAFTA fight. It is critical that Trump not be allowed to own the “trade” issue after decades of progressives leading the fight for change. As Stan Greenberg has long argued, most recently in the [American Prospect](#), the Democrats have a ‘working class problem’ that includes voters in their diverse base and reaching them requires embracing much bolder economic policies for an economy that works for everyone, not just the rich. Getting the messaging right as NAFTA thrusts “trade” back into the national spotlight will affect the 2018 elections and could create a trade platform for progressive candidates prepared to run on the issue.

Progressives and Democrats have mobilized on the Affordable Care Act, Trump's budget priorities, attacks on immigrants, and race baiting after Charlottesville and in Huntsville, where they are finding a unified message in challenging Trump. But with respect to trade, progressives and Democrats in Congress do not know how to communicate in the context of Trump, who is appropriating much of their critique and a change agenda. At the same time, explaining what progressives and Democrats support gets bogged down in wonky complication.

This is a dangerous situation as we barrel into a NAFTA renegotiation that will necessarily bring out the full range of policy options, from ones demanded by progressives about which elements of the Trump administration agree, to those demanded by corporate lobbyists and the Goldman-Sachs wing of the Trump administration, including reviving elements of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Progressives focused on trade have long spoken up about the damage NAFTA has done to working people and long demanded a renegotiation. This contrasts with corporate lobbyists who opposed initiation of these talks and are now fighting against changes to existing NAFTA rules; they favor adding damaging elements from the TPP. Yet given that Trump's megaphone is loudest, simply repeating our past critiques could be interpreted as agreeing with Trump's

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“America First” perspective. In fact, progressive critics are internationalist and envision a replacement of NAFTA that improves conditions for working people in all three countries.

While the administration’s course is very uncertain, progressives know they will be fighting against the administration when it comes to NAFTA’s terms on access to medicines, financial regulation, food safety and other consumer protections, and for strong and strongly enforced NAFTA labor and environmental standards.

But critically, some of progressives’ longtime core demands are part of the administration’s NAFTA renegotiation agenda, including rolling back Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS), the broad waiver of “Buy American” procurement preferences, the absence of discipline about currency misalignment, and tightening rules of origin. While this is encouraging, it makes matters more complicated from a messaging perspective. Progressives do not presently have accessible language to push for the changes they support while simultaneously warning the public about areas of concern and differentiating from Trump’s “America First” perspective.

Effective messaging can increase the likelihood that the changes we seek are included while making those changes we oppose politically toxic.

The 2016 opinion research on the TPP supported by Open Society Foundation (OSF) revealing messaging that could unite disparate audiences and move them to action against the TPP was a game-changer and instrumental in winning that fight. Discerning how to communicate about NAFTA renegotiation in a way that is effective for all of the various target audiences is extremely complicated. One audience broke for Trump because of his “trade” rhetoric. They will shut out messaging perceived as an attack on Trump first, and his policy second, or a premature attack on his lack of follow through. If progressives are to stop NAFTA from becoming even more damaging via renegotiations, they must have messaging for these voters that reveals gaps between Trump’s rhetoric and his policy proposals.

Others are intensely anti-Trump and that leads them to oppose his trade initiatives, even when elements of those initiatives happen to be positions progressive also support. They conflate his trade critique with his xenophobic immigration and other policies and now want to be more pro-NAFTA. Anti-Trump voters who are conflicted about trade must be shown that there are real, progressive and internationalist alternatives, while simultaneously exposing where Trump has betrayed his trade promises.

Furthermore, Trump has already demonstrated his ability to use a bully pulpit of tweets to fight “disloyal” companies, like Carrier, and has every incentive to announce and claim credit for the creation of new U.S. jobs, as he has with Ford and Amazon, to name a few. A lot of that is hollow in reality, as few jobs are really being created here and firms like Carrier proceeded with significant outsourcing to Mexico. But under that distracting cover and a bevy of tough-sounding but ineffective trade Executive Orders, the Trump administration could gain momentum to implement new trade policies, including a renegotiated NAFTA, that undermine the interests of working people and harm the environment.

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Meanwhile, there are opportunities for NAFTA renegotiation to advance some of progressives' longstanding demands. In part, that is the case because such changes are critical to meeting Trump's pledged NAFTA renegotiation goals of lowering the trade deficit and creating manufacturing jobs. The challenge is that most Americans are more familiar with the critique of current policies than with the internationalist trade alternative policies progressives have long promoted. It is critical that those issues such as ISDS, labor and wage standards, and the current trade-pact waiver of "Buy American" policies are elevated in the debate in a way that connects these issues with how the American public understands the "trade" issue.

Beyond the short-term objectives of the NAFTA renegotiation, developing a new long-term messaging strategy in this new context is important if progressives are to compete nationally in future elections. Again, the "trade" issue is more challenging than others. Before Trump's victory in the GOP primary, Democrats were battling a succession of pro-business, pro-austerity, small government, and socially conservative leaders. Trump has rebranded the GOP as an America First, nationalist, mercantilist party that is perceived to be highly critical of the trade status quo, even if congressional Republicans are its fiercest defenders. That changes the whole battlefield for 2018 and 2020. It remains to be seen if Trump delivers on his campaign trade promises. But he will have an extended period in which his rhetoric will define the public's understanding rather than his actions.

We can expect that this strategy will stand again because trade is the one issue that fractures both parties. That is what was discovered in the OSF-funded public opinion research on the TPP. Trump's nationalist economic campaign elevated an increasingly anti-trade GOP base and marginalized the pro-business and pro-trade factions of the party, including the leadership in the Congress. This battle within the GOP is just beginning and will rage through future elections.

Progressives are also fractured. Obama's support of the TPP and his and Bill Clinton's support of other trade agreements has significant support in key parts of the Democratic Party. College educated voters in major metro areas and on the coasts and recent immigrant groups including Hispanics are an increasing share of the Democratic Party, and many of them support trade agreements in principle and tend to be favorably inclined towards initiatives promoted by Obama or Clinton before him. That is even more true as Trump is seen as an opponent of trade agreements. The opinion research on the TPP showed these voters could only be convinced to oppose TPP when exposed to the secretive, exclusive negotiation process and expanded corporate power via the extreme ISDS regime.

Without effective messaging, these voters may well rally behind those who are most vocal in their opposition to Trump's "America First" rhetoric, while supporting the status quo on trade agreements that progressives have long fought against and that working class voters oppose.

Finally, trade is one area where the whole policymaking and intellectual structure has disintegrated. Decades of work to amplify the damaging outcomes of past policies and processes have undermined the legitimacy of the current process and made the public suspicious about whose interests agreements serve. But this achievement amplifies the need to communicate effectively about what progressives are for and why it will make peoples' lives better.

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In the post-NAFTA, post-World Trade Organization (WTO) establishment period, progressive trade advocates have sought to stop and/or amend a succession of agreements or to demand greater transparency. Presidents of both political parties set the agenda, pushing agreements that expanded on the NAFTA/WTO model, and progressives were mostly reactive. Progressives united across the board to stop the hemisphere-wide expansion of NAFTA via the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the global expansion of investor-state dispute settlement via the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, and the expansion of the WTO's scope and powers via the proposed WTO Doha Round. The most notable recent success is the defeat of the TPP, which is the first instance of a signed trade agreement being stopped for lack of U.S. congressional support, in contrast to the agreements that were derailed during negotiations.

But progressives were unable to shape or stop many other pacts. Progressive efforts to improve agreements and the alternative trade agreement model and negotiating process progressives have developed (including in the 2009 Trade Reform Accountability Development and Employment (TRADE) Act that enjoyed more than 160 congressional cosponsors) are little known beyond the Beltway.

With a Trump administration preparing to cancel and renegotiate agreements, progressives need a whole new framework to shape their narrative and dominate the debate on trade. Again, this is new territory and progressives must be prepared to enter this debate with messaging on NAFTA that works for the working class and non-college graduate voters *and* viscerally anti-Trump coastal and metropolitan area voters alike. Unlike other controversial policy battles to come, countering Trump on trade requires progressives to figure out how to differentiate themselves from Trump as they communicate effectively about what they support and oppose and also to think strategically about how they play out their role in Congress.