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From: Stanley Greenberg, Greenberg Research

## **Democrats Need To Lead The Fight For A Better NAFTA**

There is no upside to being on the sidelines of this debate

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Donald Trump remains deeply unpopular with the American people, and his recent actions to undermine health care and pursuit of trickle-down tax cuts will surely make matters worse.

But the round of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) renegotiations that occurred last week in Washington reminds us that there is an area where Trump's job performance is relatively strong. According to *Democracy Corps'* most recent poll, 46 percent of registered voters approve of his "handling of trade agreements with other countries," 51 percent, how he is "putting American workers ahead of the interests of big corporations" and 60 percent, "keeping jobs in the United States."

That is made possible, in part by the relative silence of Democrats on these issues (and in spite of committed progressive trade advocates among America's unions and consumer and environmental organizations.)

Indeed, Hillary Clinton and national Democrats' failure to vociferously express their doubts about NAFTA and opposition to President Obama's signature trade policy, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), contributed mightily to Trump's victory in many of the swing Midwestern states.

What Trump knows and all Democrats must understand is this: for the voters, this is not about trade agreements like NAFTA and TPP per se. It is about the outsourcing of good paying American jobs that these agreements facilitate.

Only 11 percent of voters view "outsourcing" favorably in our most recent poll. That was vividly expressed by voters from the Rustbelt to Seattle in focus groups conducted this summer. Just hearing the word 'outsourcing' would get them fuming, and they say those are "middle income jobs" and companies that outsource jobs are "traitors" and "should be financially penalized."

While the country is evenly divided on whether NAFTA has been good for the economy, they are pretty sure it has meant fewer American jobs. That is why Trump has made trade agreements so central to his agenda – it makes him relevant to Americans' consuming struggle with jobs and wages.

NAFTA renegotiations are putting trade front-and-center again, and this time Democrats must not remain invisible. That is not just because it makes Donald Trump relevant on the issue of jobs and wages and fuels one of his only remaining areas of approval.

What is more important is the opportunity to secure changes to NAFTA for which many progressives have been fighting for so long. That includes taking on the lack of enforceable labor and environmental standards and the special protections for corporations (like Investor State Dispute Settlement) that push so many corporations to outsource good paying American jobs.

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Our focus groups and polling for Public Citizen has revealed just how much both Clinton voters and Trump voters, including his white working class base, dislike features of NAFTA. That includes some elements that progressive trade reformers have been fighting for years and that the current U.S. Trade Representative, Robert Lighthizer, proposed to address in the recent NAFTA talks.

At the top of that list is a significant rollback of the corporate investor protections and ISDS regime that make it less risky and expensive for corporations to outsource jobs to Mexico. Also proposed was an end to NAFTA's open-ended waiver of Buy American and other local preferences in government procurement that outsource our tax dollars rather than reinvesting them to create jobs here.

Trump's has reneged on too many trade-related campaign promises that enjoy progressive support like confronting currency manipulation and making negotiations more transparent for Democrats to be silent now.

Voters are also concerned by problems with NAFTA that the administration has shown no interest in addressing. The most convincing argument for major changes to NAFTA is one that says "the U.S. worker is the big loser" because NAFTA lacks enforceable "labor and environmental standards so companies can move U.S. jobs to Mexico to pay workers poverty wages" and dump pollutants and "then import those products back to the U.S. for sale." Over 80 percent of Trump voters and over 60 percent of Clinton voters found that a compelling argument against the current NAFTA. But new terms to remedy this do not appear to be at the top of the Trump trade agenda.

If saving American jobs and better wages is not enough for Democrats to take a visible stand on trade, then consider this: after a simulated debate over NAFTA, nearly 60 percent of voters came to believe NAFTA was bad for the economy and meant fewer American jobs. For Democrats, there is no upside to being on the sidelines – or worse, the wrong side – of this debate.

Democrats owe it to their voters and the country to lead the fight for a better NAFTA.