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How Have Members of Congress Reacted to President Trump's Trade Policy?

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Abstract: While a number of studies in recent years explore the particularistic tendencies of presidents – targeting various benefits to districts and states that will help their and their party's electoral prospects – little work has explored how members of Congress react to such behavior. We take some initial steps in this regard by examining how members have responded to President Donald Trump's trade initiatives. We analyze congressional newsletter mentions of tariffs or trade as a means of exploring congressional reaction. We find a positive relationship between tariff/trade mentions and partisanship, as Republican members and members from states that Trump won in 2016 are more likely to refer to tariffs/trade in their newsletters. This represents, we argue, a different kind of credit claiming. These basic empirical patterns set the stage for more systematic analysis in the future.

Introduction

President Donald Trump has made renegotiating trade deals with foreign nations a centerpiece of his administration's economic policy. Since January 2016, President Trump has used his unilateral authority to raise tariff levels on a range of products – including solar panels, washing machines, and steel and aluminum – as a way of “putting America first.”¹ These tariffs have affected trade with a

¹ Where does the president's unilateral trade authority come from? In 1934, Congress passed the Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act (RTAA), which provided the president with wide proclamatory discretion regarding the adjustment of tariff rates and schedules. In 1962, Congress passed the Trade Expansion Act, which broadened the president's trade authority by allowing him to

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number of countries, including Canada, Mexico, Australia, Argentina, China, Brazil, India, and South Korea (in addition to the European Union). More recently, President Trump has targeted China and South Korea specifically, and sought (somewhat successfully) new trade deals with the two nations. Finally, President Trump has eschewed existing multilateral trade deals – withdrawing the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, for example – and sought instead to create bilateral trade agreements with most individual countries.²

While President Trump contends that his trade deals will be beneficial for the country, by (among other things) bringing jobs and industries back to the US that have been moved overseas, the economic impact has been staggering. As of mid-December 2019, the American Action Forum reports that “the president’s tariffs, when combined with corresponding retaliation, threaten over \$470 billion of traded goods annually ... and could increase nationwide consumer costs by nearly \$69.8 billion annually.” (Varas 2019). As of now, American consumers and businesses have paid an additional \$42 billion since President Trump’s trade war with China began in February 2018, with an additional \$4 billion paid in October alone.³ And while there are local success stories – like Granite City, Illinois, where US Steel Corp. rekindled two blast furnaces in March 2018 after 3 years, and put 1600 steelworkers back to work – they have been rare, and it’s not clear they will be lasting (Donnan and Deux 2019).

How should we think about the politics of President Trump’s trade strategy? One school of thought suggests that he is being true to his word, in that President Trump considers himself the steward of the nation and is pursuing what he believes is in the best interests of the US. As Howell and Moe (2016, p. xvi) argue: “presidents are truly national leaders with national constituencies who think in national terms about national problems.” In other words, they are *universalistic*. A different school of thought suggests that President Trump focuses not on the nation as a whole, but on a *subset* of the nation. As Kriner and Reeves (2015, p. 3)

negotiate multilateral (as well as bilateral) agreements, while also including additional safeguards to protect domestic industry. Finally, in 1974, Congress passed the Trade Reform Act, which further expanded the president’s authority in the realm of trade, but also provided itself with a formal role in the monitoring of executive action. More recent trade laws have largely been adjustments of the 1974 Act, based on changing world conditions. Recent proclamations have invoked Section 232 of the 1962 Act or Section 301 of the 1974 Act.

² President Trump has also sought to replace the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with a new deal – the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). (At the time of this writing, the USMCA has been signed by all three nations but not yet ratified.)

³ See <https://tariffshurt.com/news/trade-war-has-cost-americans-additional-42-billion-including-over-4-billion-in-october-alone>.

argue: “[presidents] pursue policies that target public benefits disproportionately toward some political constituencies at the expense of others.” Presidents, from this perspective, are *particularistic*. And which political constituencies do presidents target? Those that are important for their and their congressional party’s reelection chances.

Kriner and Reeves (2015) uncover evidence that presidents are particularistic in a variety of contexts, including base closings, disaster declarations, and federal grant allocations. They and Lowande, Jenkins, and Clarke (2018) also find evidence for presidential particularism in US trade policy. In the latter case, the authors find in a set of analyses (unilateral adjustments to US trade policies between 1917 and 2006, and more extensively between 1986 and 2006) that presidents – in accordance with electoral incentives – strategically allocate trade protections to industries in politically valuable states. Is there evidence that President Trump has pursued a similar particularistic trade policy? Rickard (2018, p. 6) argues that there is, noting that in 2017, President Trump “launched an investigation of foreign steel imports in order to fulfil a campaign promise he made to steel workers in two important swing states: Ohio and Pennsylvania.”

President Trump also uses social media to remind the American public of his trade agenda continuously. Over the last 3 years, for example, the President referenced trade or tariffs 473 times on Twitter; put differently, approximately 3% of all his tweets talk about trade. While this agenda-setting behavior is notable in itself, Figure 1 underscores the relative attention given to trade over other essential policy domains. If we look at President Trump’s monthly tweets on trade,



Figure 1: @realDonaldTrump Tweets Explicitly Referencing Policy Domains Since 2016.

healthcare, and taxes, we see that trade or tariff-related tweets have generally outpaced these other important topics since early 2018.⁴

While some studies have investigated presidential actions in the area of trade, no research has examined how members of Congress have reacted in response. As the president is the leader of his party, he is often held to target particularistic benefits to districts and states that are represented by co-partisans in Congress (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010). Presumably, members of Congress from his party are helped by this targeting of benefits, but how exactly? That is, how do they communicate these benefits to constituents and claim credit for them by virtue of partisan affiliation (and relationship) with the president?

We examine these questions in an exploratory way, using data from congressional newsletters. We first examine how members of Congress communicate with constituents and discuss the rise of electronic newsletters in recent years. We then explore where geographically trade policy is discussed, by examining congressional membership and trade mentions in newsletters by state. Finally, we move beyond geography and examine mentions at the level of the individual member of Congress and by party. We then conclude by summarizing our initial findings and discuss ways to pursue more systematical analysis in the future.

How Do Members of Congress Communicate with Their Constituents?

For members of Congress, communication with constituents is central to their representational duties. Members routinely communicate with residents of their states or districts in order to show they are working on their behalf and to maintain a positive image among likely voters. They also seek to claim credit for particularistic benefits and to explain their roll-call votes. Members do these things in the hopes of being reelected (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978). Communication provides clear benefits, as constituents assign them more credit the more members communicate with them (Grimmer, Messing, and Westwood 2012). Additionally, electorally vulnerable members engage in more constituency communication than those who are electorally safe (Peskowitz 2018).

⁴ We code trade tweets as those in which the President explicitly references “tariff” or “tariffs” or “trade.” Healthcare includes “healthcare,” “health insurance,” “Medicare,” “Medicaid,” and “Obamacare.” Taxes includes “tax” or “taxes” anywhere in the tweet. Retweets are excluded from these monthly counts. These data were generously made available to the public by <http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive>.

Members' communication styles tend to emphasize either spending or issue positions, which are often influenced by the composition of their geographic constituency (Grimmer 2013). Members representing wealthier districts, for example, tend to emphasize issue positions (Yiannakis 1982). And members often prioritize communicating about constituency service over policy considerations (Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012). Communication also varies when constituents directly contact their elected officials. For example, members can tailor their responses to account for policy differences with a constituent (Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015), and representatives' district attentiveness appears to influence constituent evaluations of their job performance (Cover and Brumberg 1982; Lipinski 2001; Parker and Goodman 2009). Over the last few years, scholars have increasingly been interested in how lawmakers interact with citizens in their electoral districts. Despite the resurgent attention paid to Fenno's (1978) concept of "home style," more work is needed to explore the strategic communication efforts of congressional offices (Cormack 2016b).

We argue that when a president targets benefits to co-partisan districts or states, those members are incentivized to mention the president's actions to constituents. This represents a different form of credit claiming. That is, members can claim they are responsible for the particularistic benefits not because of what they did – which is the typical form of credit claiming – *but because of who they are*. More specifically, members of Congress can strategically craft messages that invoke the president's actions, discuss how constituents are better off, and "claim credit" for the result – because members *not of the president's party* are not being targeted in the same way. This will lead constituents to evaluate them more positively.

To advance our understanding of Congress' role in presidential particularism, we conduct an exploratory analysis of newsletter data provided by the D.C. Inbox project (dcinbox.com), which provides publicly available newsletter data for all members of Congress – both House members and senators – from 2011 to present day (Cormack 2017). For our purposes, we export and hand-code congressional identification numbers for all newsletters between 2011 and July 2019.

Members of Congress have increasingly turned to electronic newsletters as a method of constituency communication. These newsletters allow members to craft official messages to individuals that sign-up for email delivery. Newsletter subscribers are generally older, wealthier, more politically active, and more extreme (Cormack 2016a, p. 578). Members tend to stress their opposition to bills that pass. Members also work to frame themselves ideologically in ways that might not be captured by their roll-call voting. More simply, members of Congress use their official newsletters to communicate messages that benefit them electorally (Cormack 2016a,b). As such, we might expect them to communicate about the president's targeted benefits when it is in their electoral interests.

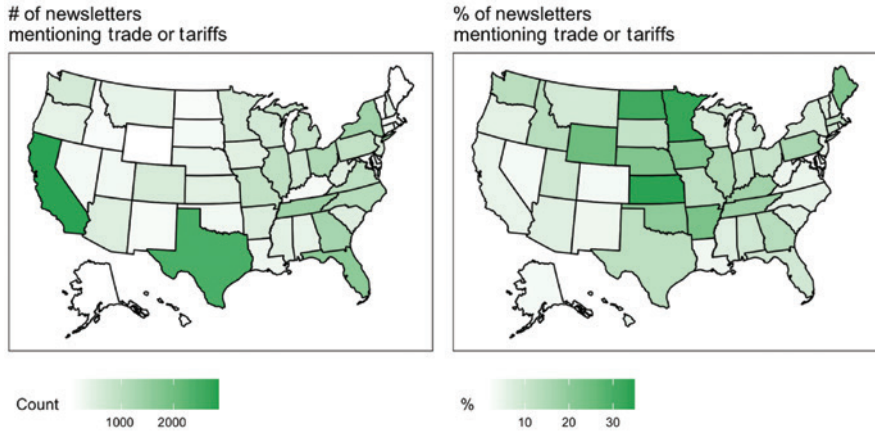


Figure 2: Geographic Patterns in Congressional Newsletters Referencing Trade (2017–2019).

In the sections that follow, we provide a series of descriptive patterns in the congressional newsletter data. First, we examine the geographic distribution of trade mentions.⁵ Second, we evaluate individual-level variation within the two parties, and finally, we consider the partisan trajectory of trade mentions over time. Taken together, these exploratory analyses provide a roadmap to a number of outstanding research questions, which we discuss before concluding.

Where is Trade Policy Discussed?

The maps in Figure 2 indicate patterns in congressional communication throughout the first year and a half of the Trump administration. The map on the left displays the raw number of newsletters between January 2017 and July 2019 that explicitly reference “trade” or “tariffs” in members’ emailed correspondence with constituents. The map on the right depicts the percentage of each state delegation’s newsletters that refer to trade policy. In both cases, darker shades of green indicate greater attention given to trade policy.

If we look at the raw count of trade-related newsletters, members from states like California and Texas seem to be particularly vocal in their discussion of tariffs. This may reflect the economic impact of recent tariffs on their local economies. Texas, for example, is home to a majority of the top trading ports with Mexico, and President Trump’s 2019 proposal to enact a tariff on all Mexican

⁵ We searched on “trade,” “tariff,” and “tariffs.”

goods threatened to impose billions of dollars in economic losses (and raise the price of Chipotle burritos).⁶ Similarly, California's dependence on imports renders the state particularly vulnerable to shocks in trade policy.

Note, however, that a state-level count of newsletters mentioning tariffs runs the risk of merely reflecting population dynamics. Populous states have more seats in the US House, and thus are more likely to issue a greater number of newsletters in general. We thus evaluate each delegation's total newsletters as a function of their congressional representation. Here we see a starkly different state pattern. These data suggest that when Midwestern lawmakers write to their constituents, they talk a lot about trade policy. Many of these states are also likely affected more by a prolonged trade war with China. For example, Minnesota, Kansas, and North Dakota depend upon exports for 6.2%, 6.9%, and 14% of their state GDP, respectively.⁷ Taken together, these patterns suggest, perhaps unsurprisingly, that representatives of states dependent on international trade talk more about trade and tariffs.

Of course, a narrow focus on economic interests implicitly ignores the political imperatives laid out by American electoral institutions. Political scientists are increasingly interested in the use of trade adjustments for particularistic purposes, and the aforementioned literature documents how presidents can strategically change tariff policy to improve their odds of victory in the competition for electoral college votes. In Figure 3, we consider the relationship between each state's percentage of newsletters mentioning trade policy and President Trump's two-party vote share in the 2016 election.⁸

More specifically, we hand-code states using the thresholds laid out in Kriner and Reeves (2015).⁹ States in which President Trump received more than 55% of the two-party vote share in 2016 are coded as "core states" (blue), while states that provided less than 45% of the two-party vote share are coded as "hostile states" (red). Those states in the middle – i.e. those in which President Trump won between 45 and 55% of the two-party vote share – are coded as "swing states" (purple).

⁶ <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/how-donald-trump-tariffs-imports-mexico-affect-texas/>.

⁷ <https://howmuch.net/sources/how-much-tariffs-could-cost-each-state>.

⁸ We adjust the data provided by the *New York Times* to identify the president's two-party vote share (<https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/president>).

⁹ Unlike Kriner and Reeves (2015), however, we take only the 2016 electoral data, rather than a multi-year average. We prefer this approach, in part, because President Trump has expressed little public interest in considering prior electoral patterns to chart his political strategy.

Who Talks About Trade Policy?

In Figures 4 and 5, we analyze the intraparty differences in the frequency of trade-related newsletters. In Figure 4, each dot indicates the ideological position of Republican members of Congress from 2017 to 2019 according to two dimensions

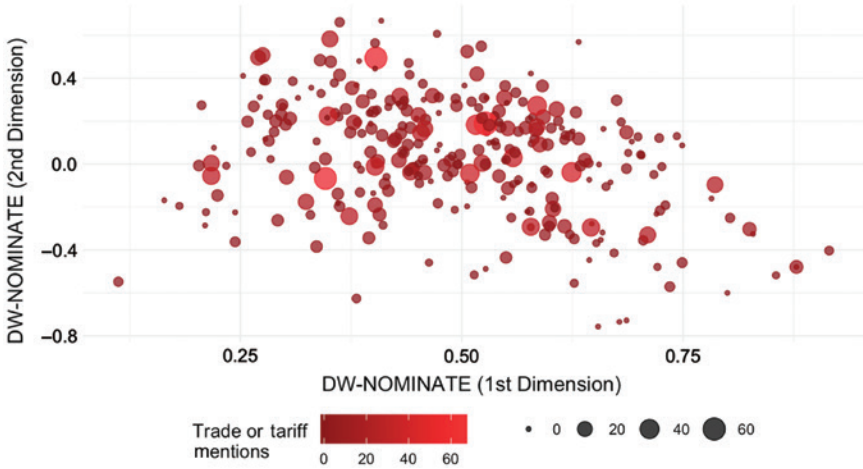


Figure 4: Ideological Patterns in Trade References Among Congressional Republicans.

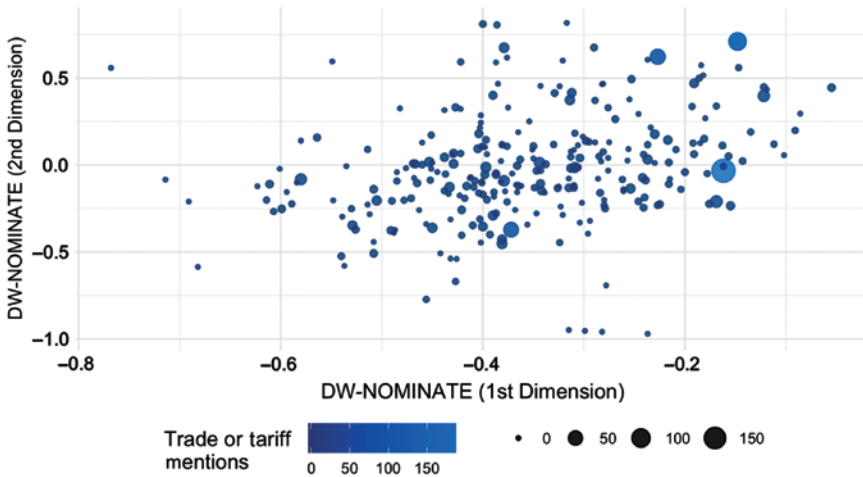


Figure 5: Ideological Patterns in Trade References Among Congressional Democrats.

of members' "revealed ideology," as measured by DW-NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal 2007). Dots are further color-coded and scaled by the frequency of trade policy mentions. Republicans who talk about tariffs or trade in their newsletters are larger and brighter red.

Few clear patterns emerge among Republican lawmakers. Although we might note the relatively few trade mentions in the right-wing of the party, it is difficult to discern anything systematic in the data. While a full text analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that these patterns may obscure splits in the positive reception of presidential trade announcements. In some cases, Republican lawmakers use newsletters to explain attempts to pressure the administration into backing down from damaging tariffs. Others, however, articulate the political value of presidential actions. Take, for example, this excerpt from a Dan Newhouse (WA-04) newsletter in June 2019:

This past week, President Trump proved that tariffs, while they can be unsettling in the short-term, are a powerful negotiating tool when Mexico agreed to take responsibility and act to help curb the number of migrants attempting to cross into the United States. This gives me hope that the Administration can continue to make progress leveling the playing field with China. In the meantime, Congress must ratify the USMCA.

Our blunt measurement strategy may obscure key fault lines within the Republican Party; still, it is not readily apparent that trade policy is a higher priority for a particular faction within the GOP during this time period.

Figure 5 provides a similar overview of Democrats. Lawmakers are similarly color-coded and scaled by the frequency of trade policy mentions, where Democrats that more frequently raise trade-related issues in newsletters are visually larger and brighter blue. Here there may be a slight pattern in centrist Democrats more willing to discuss trade matters. Take, for example, Collin Peterson's (MN-07) recounting of a conversation with the White House Congressional Liaison in July 2019:

I gave them a frank overview of what is going on in the farm economy. I also used the opportunity to again talk about the large manufacturer and the issue they were having with tariffs. I agree that China is a bad actor, but it is important that our manufacturers aren't at a competitive disadvantage for doing business in the U.S.A.

This sort of engagement with the Trump administration differs from the general claims of recklessness in foreign affairs present in many Democratic newsletters.

These figures demonstrate a considerable difference between the parties in their congressional communication about trade and tariffs. First, in general,

Republican members of Congress mention trade and tariffs more frequently than Democrats, suggesting Republicans see communicating about President Trump’s trade policies to be electorally beneficial. Second, although position taking in congressional communication is more often employed by extreme legislators, Republicans across the ideological spectrum communicate frequently about trade policy. As such, it appears Republicans whose districts are not targeted by the president still see an advantage in communicating about trade and tariffs with their constituents.

Beyond the apparent lack of internal divisions, we might also wonder how the parties as a whole have shifted over time. Increasingly, politics have been “nationalized” in recent years (Hopkins 2018). In terms of Congress, this means that members’ electoral fate is shaped more by their party affiliation – and how the party “brand” is perceived by voters (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007) – than anything they do individually. Figure 6 illustrates the density of trade mentions in newsletters by party and over time. While Republicans speak about trade more regularly than Democrats during this time period, the distribution of trade mentions in GOP newsletters appears to skew to the right in recent years.

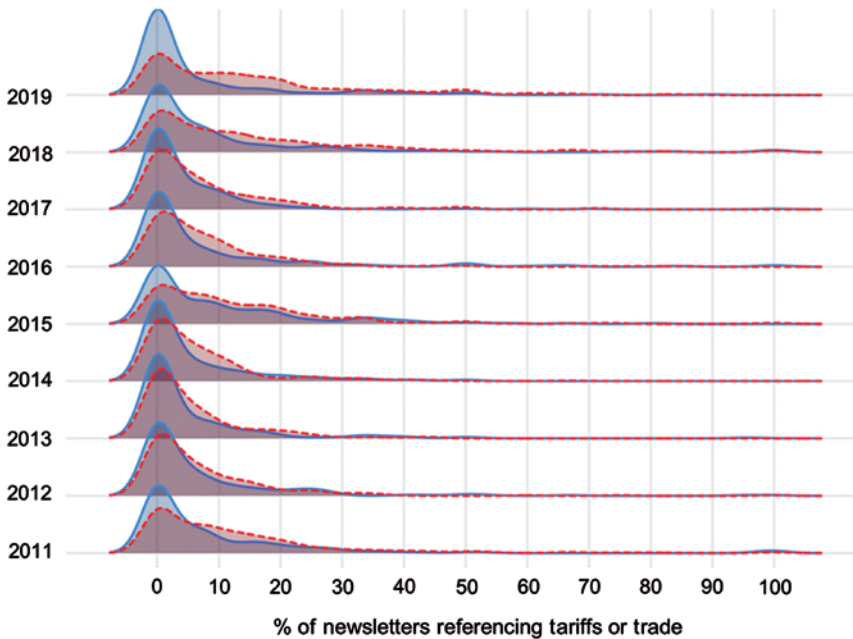


Figure 6: The Distribution of Trade References within Congressional Newsletters, by Party, Over Time.

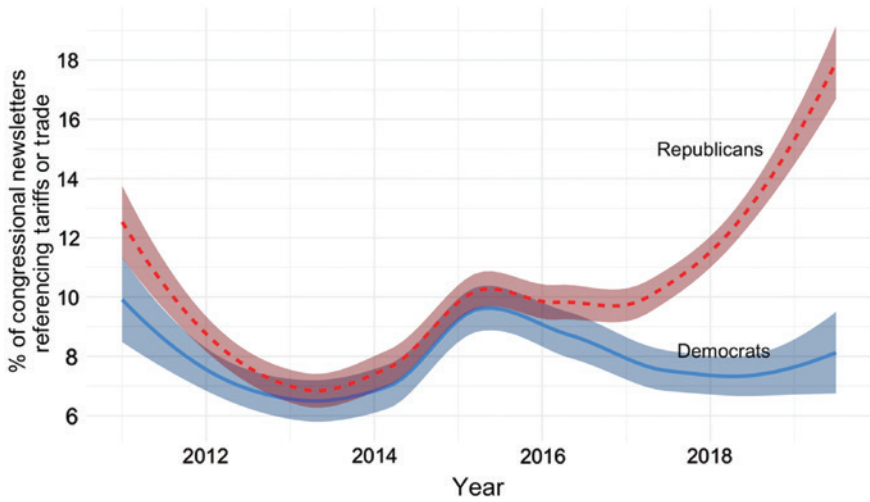


Figure 7: The Divergence Between Republican and Democratic Lawmakers After 2016 in Monthly Trade References.

While the full distribution of the data is revealing, this pattern is even more striking when we plot the non-linear trends in trade references over time (Figure 7). Between 2011 and 2016, Republicans and Democrats generally tracked each other closely. After 2016, we see a stark divergence between the two parties. Republicans are dramatically more likely than Democrats to spend time discussing tariffs or trade policy in their newsletters over the last two and a half years.

Discussion

In recent years, the study of presidential particularism has taken off, as scholars increasingly see the president not as a universalistic steward of the country, but as a particularistic political actor who operates for the benefit of his and his party's electoral interests. Research has focused on the different resources the president uses and to whom they are targeted. But no work has examined how targeted recipients – members of the president's party in Congress – are able to use those resources for their benefit. Specifically, scholars have not examined how members communicate those resource allocations to constituents and how they attempt to claim credit for them.

We take some initial steps to investigate these issues by exploring patterns in congressional communication on the issue of trade. We track how often members of Congress refer to “tariffs” or “trade” in their electronic newsletters to constituents between 2011 and 2019. Trade is an especially salient issue in recent years, as President Trump has made it a foundation of his economic policy agenda. We find that congressional communication that explicitly mentions trade is more prevalent in states affected by the president’s recent trade actions. We also find a strong partisan component. Republican members of Congress from states that Trump won in 2016 mention trade more in their newsletters. And there is a clear structural break generally in 2016, as the percentage of newsletters mentioning tariffs or trade by party diverges significantly: years of partisan overlap gave way to a significant increase among Republicans, leading to an increasing divergence between the parties.

These patterns lay the groundwork for more systematic statistical work in the future. The structural break in trade mentions by party in 2016, for example, appears to be a great candidate for a difference-in-differences analysis, especially as the pre-2016 period seems to exhibit a parallel trend. Additional work may also reveal the distinct audiences targeted by trade-related messages across a variety of mediums, including political advertisements, franked letters to constituents, electronic congressional newsletters, and social media posts. More extensive coding of tariff/trade mentions, to indicate direction (pro- versus anti-trade sentiment) and intensity, would further provide valuable opportunities to evaluate the political risks of unilateral trade adjustments for the president’s party. President Trump’s flurry of controversial tariffs obviously carries important economic ramifications, but the president’s discretion in this area also provides a valuable chance for political scientists to advance our understanding of the electoral connection and partisan dynamics.

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