**Who favors Free Trade Agreements?**

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WASHINGTON — Few issues in this campaign cycle seem as toxic as trade: Both major-party presidential candidates oppose President Obama’s 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership, and congressional leaders, having refused all year to vote on the trade accord until after the election, say they will not do so even then — potentially killing the largest regional trade pact in history.

So that must mean voters are overwhelmingly opposed, right? Wrong.

National polls continue to show that Americans either narrowly favor international trade generally, and the so-called T.P.P. specifically, or are split. Younger voters are especially favorable. But Republicans are not, reflecting the influence of the anti-trade nominee [Donald J. Trump](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/donald-trump-on-the-issues.html?inline=nyt-per) on his traditionally pro-trade party. And certainly trade remains more unpopular in battleground states like Ohio, where it is blamed for years of manufacturing job losses.

Yet the level of support for trade agreements in general, and the pending Pacific pact in particular, stands in notable contrast to the toxicity of trade in an election season largely defined by anger among working-class voters. What matters to many politicians, however, is the fact that the opponents are the ones most motivated to vote based on the issue — just as they are on issues like immigration and gun restrictions that also have more support than divisive debates suggest.

“There really is a lot of ambivalence on the part of the public” toward expanded foreign trade, said Jay Campbell, a senior vice president with the polling firm [Hart Research](http://hartresearch.com/), who is not working for a presidential campaign.

“At a very basic level they know it’s a necessary thing for the United States to trade with other countries — that is clear as a bell throughout all the polling,” Mr. Campbell said. But when asked about trade’s impact on jobs, “people are more inclined to think it’s more of a negative than a positive.”

A [survey last month](http://www.people-press.org/2016/08/18/clinton-trump-supporters-have-starkly-different-views-of-a-changing-nation/) by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center found that Americans by 50 to 42 percent said trade agreements had been “a good thing” for the United States. By a narrower 40 to 35 percent, they said the same of the Pacific pact, which would phase out tariffs and set commercial rules between the United States and nations from Canada and Japan to Australia, Vietnam and Chile.

Mr. Trump has had a measurable negative impact, the research center said. In a Pew poll a month before Mr. Trump announced his candidacy in June 2015, Republicans, by 51 to 39 percent, said trade accords had been good for the nation. By last month, after Mr. Trump was nominated, Republicans, by 61 to 32 percent, called past agreements a bad thing, a flip that has not been lost on Congress’s Republican leaders.

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Democrats’ views are little changed. Among registered voters surveyed by Pew, 55 percent of supporters of [Hillary Clinton](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/hillary-clinton-on-the-issues.html?inline=nyt-per), the Democratic nominee, said the Pacific pact would be a good thing (58 percent of Trump supporters said the opposite). And while Mrs. Clinton, under pressure from her anti-trade pact Democratic primary rival, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, came out in opposition to the T.P.P. in October, a Pew survey in March found that even 55 percent of Sanders supporters said trade agreements had been good for the country.

The pollster for the liberal group Public Citizen, which is among the most active opponents of trade agreements, [recently found](http://www.democracycorps.com/National-Surveys/on-trade-a-tpp-public-anger-about-corporate-power-dominant-factor-in-views/) that the public comes to the debate over T.P.P. from a position “bordering on neutrality,” with Republicans very negative and Democrats more positive. A plurality of all Americans favored past agreements, it said.

“The public rates past trade agreements more positively than not, though many are unsure and few hold strong opinions,” said a memo on the poll by Democracy Corps, a liberal nonprofit founded by the Democratic strategists Stanley Greenberg and James Carville.

As for the T.P.P. specifically, 56 percent of voters were either unfamiliar with it or neutral, the group said. To build opposition, Democracy Corps recommended that opponents link the agreement to the influence over government by corporations and “big money.”

Perhaps the most counterintuitive finding, given that both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump oppose the T.P.P., was in a July [Washington Post-ABC News poll](https://www.washingtonpost.com/apps/g/page/politics/washington-post-abc-news-national-poll-july-11-14/2061/). Asked if they wanted the next president to be someone who supports trade agreements or opposes them, 75 percent of respondents said they wanted a supporter and 17 percent favored an opponent.

A [Gallup poll](http://www.gallup.com/poll/191135/americans-split-idea-withdrawing-trade-treaties.aspx) early this year found that 58 percent of Americans viewed trade as an economic opportunity, 34 percent as a threat. Similarly, in [a July poll for NBC News](http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/2016-conventions/majority-voters-support-free-trade-immigration-poll-n611176), 55 percent of registered voters agreed with a statement that trade was good “because it opens up new markets and we cannot avoid the fact that it is a global economy,” while 38 percent agreed that trade was bad “because it has hurt manufacturing and other key industries.”

Among the groups most supportive of trade are younger and highly educated voters.

The Pew survey, for example, found that people with a high school education or less said that trade agreements had hurt their family’s finances — by a ratio of nearly two to one. That survey and [a poll in June](http://www.apnorc.org/PDFs/GenForward/GenForwardJuneToplinesFinal.pdf) by the Associated Press-NORC Center and Black Youth Project found that about two-thirds of voters under 30 said that trade agreements had helped them and their families.

But strategists in both parties say those who are more supportive of trade are less likely to vote on that issue than are the opponents.

“I can guarantee you that the intensity and energy on the issue is all on the anti-trade side,” said Neil Newhouse, a Republican pollster and founding partner of the firm [Public Opinion Strategies](http://pos.org/). “It’s a motivating issue, and one that hits home to Americans who are still struggling to make it back from the recession.”

He added: “Those who support free trade are more ‘lukewarm.’ For them it’s not a voting issue.”

Geoff Garin, a Democratic pollster and strategist for [Priorities USA Action](http://prioritiesusaaction.org/), a [super PAC](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/c/campaign_finance/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) supporting Mrs. Clinton, echoed Mr. Newhouse. “The people who are opposed to trade agreements feel more passionately about it than the people who are supportive of them,” he said.

Alluding to Mr. Obama’s arguments that approving the T.P.P. is crucial for American influence in the Asia-Pacific region, Mr. Garin added: “Most people don’t really live in the world of geopolitics, and don’t think very much about China’s influence in the Pacific relative to our influence in the Pacific. But they do think about jobs and wages and whether corporations can be trusted to use these trade agreements for the greater benefit of the American people.”

Presidents do worry about geopolitics, and that alone could keep the Pacific deal alive. On Friday, after Mr. Obama met with business leaders and elected officials to coordinate their uphill campaign for the accord, the mayor of Atlanta, Kasim Reed, told reporters, “People who run for office often campaign against trade, but people who become president of the United States end up supporting trade.”