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Article

Populist Backlash and Trade Agreements in North America: The Prospects for Progressive Trade

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Abstract
Populist rejection of the embedded liberal international order is evident in many Western democracies. This is partly attributable to the architects of this system, who over-promised widespread benefits while ignoring warnings from labour and fair-trade advocates about risks to economic security from transnational economic competition. This article contrasts Canadian and American conservative populist positions on free trade. Globalisation and free trade without consideration for fair trade weakened the embedded liberal compromise and undermined the Keynesian welfare state model which sustained it. While regional free trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement have had marginal negative effects, they became convenient scapegoats in a strategy of "othering" adopted by Trump and other populists. Populism arose in part in response to middle- and working-class decline (alongside cultural changes and revitalised nativism), which eroded support for embedded liberalism. The heretofore pro-trade GOP followed Trump to a more protectionist and bilateral model to press for "America first," tinged by nativist othering towards Mexico and China. This diverged from Canadian right-populist leaders, whose rhetoric generally supports freer trade despite scepticism among some supporters. Asymmetrical circumstances of the US as a global economic hegemon vs. Canada as trade-dependent middle power limits the feasibility of a protectionist, "Canada first" position while particularities of political and electoral systems create more room for nativism in the US. Polling results indicate support for free trade in both nations, with a priority for labour and social protections, which provides the potential for further engagement in progressive trade liberalisation. Hence a significant percentage of the population supports "fair-trade" approaches, not protectionism. However, many conservative politicians eschew fair-trade positions and endorse anti-labour policies. Despite gains such as the labour provisions in the Canada–US–Mexico Agreement, a right-populist alliance with fair-trade advocates and labour unions is unsustainable and would entail compromises like climate denial, anti-immigrant, and anti-equity approaches which hinder the pursuit of progressive multilateral trading regimes.

Keywords
Canada–US–Mexico Agreement; globalisation; North America; populism; protectionism; trade agreements

Issue
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1. Introduction

Ruggie (1982, as cited in Helleiner, 2019, p. 1115) argued that with the "re-embedding" of liberalism after 1945 in exchange for global openness, "national authorities were empowered to pursue 'a set of social objectives to which the industrial world had moved'…namely that governments were 'assuming much more direct responsibility for domestic social security and economic stability.'" This set the basis in the Keynesian-welfare era for liberalisation with social safety nets and compensation for those displaced by liberalising initiatives in trade, currency, and finance. Wolfe and Mendelsohn (2005, pp. 45–46) suggest that, over time, support for embedded liberalism became a matter of ideology and values around the popular compromise of liberalising openness balanced with domestic interventionism via the welfare state. Ehrlich (2010, p. 1013) describes the use

of welfare and education policies to compensate those negatively affected and build support for trade liberalisation. Since the 1980s, the rise of neoliberalism, globalisation, and erosion of middle and working-class well-being has challenged support for this compromise as neoliberalism essentially reversed embedded liberalism. Verbeek (2022) notes how "embedded neoliberalism" affected trade agreements, as support for those negatively affected by liberalisation and globalisation decreased, and economic circumstances for many also declined. This contributed to an invigorated protectionist populism appealing to actual or relatively deprived classes.

Commitments by Western governments (such as those of Bill Clinton, Jean Chrétien, and Tony Blair) to embed a meaningful social dimension in trade accords were weakened in the 1990s. Fair-trade arguments, undervalued by supporters of liberalisation, were marginalised in many free trade agreements, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA; Finbow, 2006). NAFTA's labour, environmental, and social dimensions were ineffectively implemented and contributed to dissatisfaction with free trade in these countries. The current rhetoric of right-wing populists on job losses and wage decreases echoes earlier critiques by left-wing labour and fair-trade critics of globalisation and free trade. The weakness of progressive fair-trade measures provided the conditions for populism to flourish. Fair-trade concerns were in part co-opted by populists promoting broader nativist and nationalist, protectionist approaches. The decline in the middle- and working-class communities gave fuel to populists claiming to support these classes and communities despite sponsorship by, or membership in, the wealthiest elites.

As a thin-centred ideology, populism is subject to manipulation by leaders who extol a simple distinction between the "corrupt elite" versus the "pure people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 151). Specific populist approaches to trade in various states reflect differential domestic political configurations and variable insertion of states into the global economy. The US primary elections allowed right-wing populists and protectionists to secure control of the Republican Party. As a global economic hegemon, the US could focus on bilateralism and the imposition of its desired positions. This facilitated Trump's unilateral tariffs and withdrawal from the multilateral Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). After years of inaction, some fair-trade arguments were made more effectively in coalition with populists via Trump's agreement with liberal Democrats on labour and investment changes in the Canada–US–Mexico Agreement (CUSMA). In Canada, a smaller trade-dependent player and a taker of trade rules and regimes, most right-populist leaders defend the pursuit of free trade agreements with limited consideration for fair trade.

National particularities affect how populism evolves. Erl (2021, p. 108) illustrates how right populist movements within one country (Canada) can appeal to different constituencies; "thin populism" as an "ideational" construct "can serve as a way for those with elite backgrounds to lead movements seemingly against their own interests." The emphasis here is on the role of leaders in framing the populist message and enhancing a connection with mobilised followers. Economic distress and cultural nationalism and nativism, plus the context of institutions (especially electoral systems) and the use leaders make of populist, nativist rhetoric, seem pivotal to the different trajectories of populist movements in the two North American states. American populists like Trump have brought together racist, nativist, and marginal outsiders via "scapegoating" in the context of globalisation and economic insecurity and declining prospects (relative deprivation). Canadian populist leaders have evoked some populist cultural messaging but not protectionist economic populism, employing what Budd (2020, 2021) terms "neoliberal populism."

This article will trace the rise of populist challenges to free trade in the US and Canada and compare the positions of populist leaders and public opinion on trade and fair-trade elements, notably labour. Despite similar backlash based on the failure of embedded liberal approaches, the study will contrast populist messaging to illustrate how political and economic contexts shape engagement with globalisation and trade, confirming Rodrik's (2021) claim that there are both protectionist and pro-trade populists. The analysis is based on academic studies and qualitative sources such as government documents, legislative proceedings, journalistic and NGO publications, politicians' statements, and political party discourses. Public opinion surveys by polling firms, university institutes, or government agencies are also used. The article canvasses changes in public opinion towards regional trade agreements in North America. It will reference CUSMA to assess changes induced by the populist critique (especially labour rights protections and the rapid response mechanism). It concludes by discussing the prospects for regional or multilateral trade instruments with a fair-trade component on labour matters.

2. Globalisation, Economic Insecurity, and the Rise of Populism

The post-war liberal order in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade focused on tariff elimination and liberalised commerce. The International Labour Organization (ILO) lacked enforcement powers but delimited core worker rights and sought voluntary adoption of its conventions, with consultation and monitoring of improvements. In the 1990s, some Western governments pursued trade agreements such as NAFTA, which promoted liberalisation with enforceable sanctions on trade and investment matters but only consultation and coordination on labour, environment, and social provisions. There was a brief discussion of World Trade Organization (WTO)

reforms to address unfair competition from low wages and poor working conditions but developing world critics argued that lower labour costs were a form of "comparative advantage" for developing states. Such matters were relegated to the consultative ILO (Finbow, 2006, pp. 15–16). In 2001, notwithstanding the Tiananmen tragedy and the absence of independent civil society organisations and labour unions, China was accepted in WTO with no social guarantees.

Faced with these setbacks, civil society groups sought a meaningful social dimension in new trade and investment agreements, with some degree of success. EU, Canadian, and US trade policies contain measures which can lead to loss of trade access, especially for developing states which do not enforce basic labour rights. Bastiaens and Postnikov (2019) suggest that public support for preferential trade agreements was increased by the inclusion of these social standards. In negotiations between developed world partners, such as those with North America for Canada–EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and TTIP, there were opportunities for input from civil society and stakeholders in business, labour, and social movements. There was optimism that globalisation in the economic realm could potentially be constrained by transnational social movements. There were extensive NGO pressures for enforceable labour rights, but these resulted in only weak consultative complaints processes in NAFTA (Finbow, 2006, p. 53). While governments speak of the progressive character of CETA's sustainability chapters, some civil society critics demur, and the effectiveness of these provisions remains to be seen (Finbow, 2022, pp. 317–318). For more critical analysts, "neither the US nor EU has so far succeeded in establishing a system of obligations and enforcement robust enough to achieve measurable upward convergence of the labor practices of most trading partners" (Polaski, 2022, p. 216). In the North American cases, free trade agreements "with standards already have a bad reputation with environmental and labour groups" owing to ineffectively enforced provisions of the NAFTA side agreements (Ehrlich, 2018, p. 167).

Warnings of the negative impact of corporate-oriented trade and investment deals from fair-trade advocates in civil society and unions went unheeded while developing world resistance precluded enforceable global social standards. Yet the centrists continued to extol the benefits of the "golden handshake" of globalisation, generating disillusionment for many of the losers of this dramatic transformation with inadequate or impossible compensation measures (Kolben, 2021). Fair traders, who are misleadingly portrayed as protectionists by some analysts (Ehrlich, 2010), attempted to promote alternative trade regimes to cushion the costs of liberalisation to the middle and working classes in both the North and South. The erosion of living standards beginning from the 1970s oil shocks and subsequent decline of Fordism, and the end of the Keynesian consensus gave new urgency to the question of fair trade and competition. While these concerns originated with progressive NGOs, they eventually gave fuel to populists like Trump, who flailed at the unfair treatment of American workers. Trump sought to adjust the trade regime through pressure on partners using America's economic might to secure changes, sold to some social segments with nativist messaging. Canadian populists adopted many of Trump's rhetorical and policy elements (on China's rise, migration and climate, for instance) but, as a more modest economic player, did not emulate his protectionism; but Canada's parliamentary electoral system required moderated or disguised nativism for conservatives seeking to win in urbanised areas (Budd, 2021; Kwak, 2020).

Rodrik (2021) notes that gradual cultural change is less likely to explain a recent marked increase in support for populists (including left, but mostly right). The erosion of middle and working classes is extensive and partly explains the weakening of liberal values domestically and transnationally. Evidence from the 1990s to 2010s indicates a middle-class decline of around 4% for Canada and the US, coupled with increases in lower and upper classes as economic polarisation sharpened (Salvatori & Manfredi, 2019, p. 13). The globalisation gamble around embedded liberal institutions contributed to the loss of manufacturing jobs to the developing world, which undercut the incomes of working- and middle-class North Americans without sufficient creation of high-paid technology and service sector employment. This deprived less educated individuals of social mobility (Bonvillian, 2016). Salvatori and Manfredi (2019) connect economic insecurity and decline to job polarisation, especially the decline of middle-skill employment and wage decreases for middle-income jobs. Despite the increased polarisation in both economies, lower-income Canadians may fare slightly better than their American counterparts, given the nature of their welfare state (Lapointe, 2019). Nonetheless, pressures of polarisation, financialisation of housing, and attendant inflation increase a sense of economic insecurity in that country as well (Montgomery, 2018).

While regional trade deals like NAFTA are used as scapegoats for the middle and working-class decline, broader economic changes induced by technological change, financial mobility, and China's accession to WTO play a bigger role in economic insecurity. Some studies suggest NAFTA's impact before renegotiation was positive for US exports with "insignificant" impacts from imports (Woldu et al., 2018). But China's emergence in WTO as a global manufacturing behemoth had negative implications for US employment (Hassan & Nassar, 2018). Therefore, regional trade deals play a small role versus technology and globalisation and China's WTO accession, which was a major factor in "crashing the NAFTA party" (Dussel Peters & Gallagher, 2013). The slide in middle- and working-class fortunes and the weakening of the compromise of embedded liberalism around Keynesianism and the welfare state

gave fuel to populism, nationalism, and protectionism and prompted questioning of the global liberal order. While the causes of working and middle-class decline are complex, populists like Trump highlighted trade deals like NAFTA and the rise of China to target identifiable "others''; this nativist rhetoric was muted or disguised in most Canadian populist circles (Budd, 2021; Kwak, 2020).

3. Trump, Nativist Populism, and Disrupted Trade

Bisbee et al. (2020) investigate how "disenchantment" with the embedded liberal bargain reduced support for free trade and globalisation sentiments, especially among individuals and localities at "occupational risk" from displacement of employment. Autor et al. (2016, p. 45) have documented how right-wing Republican globalisation and trade sceptics displaced moderates, especially in districts negatively affected by competition from China, not NAFTA. But slow processes of globalisation, technological change, and investment outflow were an amorphous target; "the employment consequences of trade" were "acutely recognizable and therefore politically actionable." Polling illustrates how Trump effectively used concern about unfair trade to gain support. Public opinion in the US did not turn away from trade overall, with majorities midway through Trump's term still perceiving economic benefits (Jones, 2019). Nonetheless, variations by levels of education and income were evident, and trade deals like NAFTA, TTIP, and TPP served as convenient scapegoats for the populist targeting of "others." Negative impacts in sectors like automotive and a decline in specific communities allowed Trump to demonise Mexico and China and move the Republican Party away from support for free trade. This was a key component of his administration's trade policy. While trade:

> Has not been the sole cause of the recent loss of manufacturing jobs or of the attendant societal distress…it cannot be denied that the outsourcing of jobs from high- to low-wage places has devastated communities in the American Rust Belt and elsewhere. (Lighthizer, 2020, p. 7)

The United States Trade Representative (2017, p. 7) stated firmly that:

> Americans have been put at an unfair disadvantage in global markets. Under these circumstances, it is time for a new trade policy that defends American sovereignty, enforces US trade laws, uses American leverage to open markets abroad, and negotiates new trade agreements that are fairer and more effective both for the United States and for the world trading system, particularly those countries committed to a market-based economy.

NAFTA was perceived positively by Americans in its first 15 years though in the 2008 financial crisis more people perceived it as negative. The populist frame introduced by Trump took on an ideological tone which mobilised formerly indifferent or sympathetic members of the public to a negative perception of NAFTA and trade. While in the early years of NAFTA's existence, supporters of the two parties held similar views, after Trump's targeting of the "unfair" deal, a wide gap of 45% opened up in the parties' assessments (Saad, 2019). Exit polls indicated that 65% of Trump voters believed free trade eliminated jobs (The Canadian Press, 2017). "Attitudes toward the economy and international trade—combined with Trump's uniquely (among Republican candidates) critical stance on NAFTA—played a key role in Donald Trump's electoral victory" (Blendon et al., 2017, p. 239). The partisan character of responses to NAFTA was dramatic. In response to Trump's attacks, Democrats' support for the accord soared to historic highs, while Republicans were highly divided among non-Trump members of that party, with 61% favouring the deal, compared to 68% of Trump supporters who deemed NAFTA "bad" (Smeltz & Kafura, 2018).

Trump was able to leverage a general unease with globalisation and its impact on jobs to mobilise a populist nationalist response. As Ehrlich and Gaghan (2023) demonstrate, Trump pulled anti-trade forces together with xenophobes in a successful populist coalition in 2016. Polling data indicates that while Democrats shared a concern that globalisation was bad for jobs, Republican voters were more likely to define the US as an overall loser (Finbow, 2018, p. 198). Republicans signalled a new toughness on trade, and their 2016 election platform previewed this assertive stance. "Republicans understand that you can succeed in a negotiation only if you are willing to walk away from it. A Republican president will insist on parity in trade" and could implement countervailing duties or higher tariffs "if other countries refuse to cooperate" (Republican Platform, 2016, p. 3). From the 2016 campaign on, President Trump asserted that NAFTA was "unacceptable" in its current form and swiftly gave the required notice to commence renegotiation. Improvements were aimed at protecting workers "whose hold on their jobs has been tenuous due to a flawed trade agreement" (United States Trade Representative, 2018, p. 9). Trump framed this policy shift in dramatic terms: "The era of economic surrender is over. From now on, we expect trading relationships to be fair and to be reciprocal" (The White House, 2018). Prominent congressional Republicans like Chick Grassley supported the president's efforts to correct "injustices" in trade though they worried that retaliatory tariffs as undertaken by the president were only useful as temporary measures (Grassley, 2018).

Polling indicated concern with social elements, especially child labour, human rights, worker health and safety, and, to a lesser extent, environmental impacts (Jones, 2019). Ironically, right populists inaugurated

changes in NAFTA, which matched the long-frustrated demands of labour and left civil society actors. Trade Representative Lighthizer highlighted the impact of lost jobs and declining life changes for too many from a globalisation driven by an emphasis on overall efficiency notwithstanding inequitable distribution (Lighthizer, 2020). Right populist construction of the need to improve trade to prevent unfair treatment by foreign states was a pronounced element of Trumpism (Csehi & Heldt, 2021) which succeeded where fair-trade and labour advocates had failed for decades. Populist targeting of NAFTA did produce innovations in CUSMA, like the rapid response mechanism to permit US action against specific Mexican enterprises which violated freedom of association and collective bargaining laws (Polaski et al., 2022, pp. 148–149). The renegotiated NAFTA contained significant transformations and improvements in obligations, ironically committing Mexico to protections for collective bargaining and freedom of association which exceed "right to work" states in the US. This, plus other aspects of Trump's "America First" trade emphasis, did have an appreciable effect on reducing American scepticism of trade (Table 1 below) agreements as national interests were perceived as better defended.

CUSMA was born at a unique moment whereby Democratic legislators in Congress held a majority after the 2018 midterm elections. The election of a leftist Mexican president who supported labour law reform protective of independent unions, a long-time request of transnational labour activists, was also essential. Many fair-trade Democrats welcomed Trump's emulation of longstanding union and NGO concerns about NAFTA's Chapter 11 investor disputes mechanism and the North American Agreement on Labour Cooperation's weak labour side agreement. Democrats insisted on stronger provisions on labour and other matters as incorporated in a Protocol of Amendment. Once the revised elements were included, a clear congressional majority voted in favour of the deal, except for a limited number of liberal Democrats in the 116th Congress, and negotiations succeeded. It included an improved labour element, though America's own commitment to labour rights remains suspect, as seen in the increase in "right to work" states" limiting union organisation and activity (Fortin et al., 2022). But these changes were only achieved in a problematic and temporary alliance of Trump loyalists and fair traders in Congress with a retrograde populist movement which opposes climate action and undermines democratic accountability and racial and gender equity. These circumstances were exceptional and paved the way for labour law changes that may or may not be sustainable going forward. The revised NAFTA secured support from Americans as well, with the new agreement more popular than NAFTA. It required collaboration between union-supported Democrats in Congress and the Trump administration, which led to gains like the rapid response mechanism, which labour groups in the US and Canada have welcomed. Going forward, the right-populist movement could block serious environmental or climate initiatives while providing superficial assistance to Mexican labour in some sectors (automotive) but sustaining right-to-work and anti-labour litigation domestically (as evidenced in the anti-union character of many judicial appointments).

4. Canada: Neoliberal Populism and Trade in an Open Economy

Studies in Canada from the early 2000s showed deference to governments on free trade agreements and trade liberalisation but scepticism about globalisation, which increased with the erosion of middle-class opportunities (Mendelsohn et al., 2002). In its early years, support for NAFTA fluctuated before a generally pro-free trade consensus emerged (Graves, 2017). Since early free trade scepticism in the 1990s, support for NAFTA grew steadily by 2018, with 63% perceiving NAFTA as positive for the economy, up from 50% in 2011 (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2018, p. 41). NAFTA and trade agreements, in general, received a boost from concerns over Trump's protectionist rhetoric. Trade topped Canadians' list of political issues in 2017, with support for NAFTA increasing (Jenkins, 2017). The consensus

Table 1. US public opinion towards trade: Obama to Trump to Biden.

Date	Opportunity	Threat	Both	Neither	No Opinion
2022, February 1–17	61	35	2	*	2
2021, February 3–18	79	18	3	*	1
2020, February 3–16	79	18	3	*	1
2019, February 1–10	74	21	2	*	2
2018, February 1–10	70	25	3	*	3
2017, February 1–5	72	23	2	*	2
2016, February 3–7	58	34	3	1	3
2015, February 8–11	58	33	5	1	2
2014, February 6–9	54	38	4	*	3
2013, February 7–10	57	35	3	1	3

Note: * = no data. Source: Jones and Saad (2020).

that trade is important for Canada's economy seems clear, with 75% recognising the importance of trade (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2018, p. 6). Notably, partisans of the three major federal parties all showed support for NAFTA in 2017 polls (Stokes, 2017). Canadians express support for reformed agreements like CUSMA but demonstrate low knowledge of these complex deals (Emmanuel, 2022). Nevertheless, this does indicate potential Canadian support for re-engaging and re-energising trade liberalisation, especially with higher levels of support than in the other North American states (see Figure 1).

Canadian right and populist parties such as the People's Party of Canada, United Conservatives in Alberta and other provincial parties, and an increasing element in the federal Conservative Party have adopted some populist othering rhetoric. They have adjusted positions on immigration and some social and cultural issues. One analyst credits the Harper government with the "mainstreaming of right-populist discourse in Canada" (Kwak, 2020, p. 1180), including engagement with cultural nativism. Budd (2021, p. 170) likewise notes that "the dog whistle politics of the Harper Conservatives, while not overtly xenophobic, racist, or nativist, have helped to provide the ideological and discursive space for subsequent radical right actors in Canada." But for electoral prudence, the Canadian right employed the discourse of "neoliberal populism" which emphasises economic liberalisation and traditional family values (Budd, 2021, p. 156). This can be observed in both the federal and provincial wings of the Conservative Party, notably in Doug Ford's populist-inspired victories in Ontario, where conventional economic liberalism is emphasised alongside anti-elite rhetoric (Budd, 2020; Erl, 2021).

As such, while subtly emphasising "the people" in an exclusionary variant of othering, Canadian populists have not followed a nationalist logic to oppose free trade. This applies even to the more populist Peoples Party, which would "aggressively pursue" free trade, including with significant new partners like China and India (People's Party of Canada, 2019). The Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), which negotiated deals like the Canada–EU CETA, urged that Canada should work with "international organizations and individual nations to reduce protectionist policies to secure free trade agreements" (CPC, 2018, p. 11). They emphasised "the importance of secure access to international markets through a rules-based trading system…to maximize the benefits we have as a free trading nation" (CPC, 2018, p. 17). Trade tensions with the US led the Conservative opposition to question the Trudeau government's signing of CUSMA before Trump withdrew punitive tariffs on steel and aluminium, but this focused on the loss of leverage rather than the content of CUSMA (House of Commons Canada, 2020, pp. 1848–1852). After 2020, some conservative politicians' rhetoric has embraced Trump-inspired populism on cultural, socially conservative, and nativist lines especially motivated by anti-vaccine movement activism during the Covid-19 pandemic (Gillies, 2022, pp. 12–13).

While overall support for trade deals remains evident, many feel that NAFTA benefited the US more than Canada. CUSMA was greeted with scepticism north of the border, with the perception that Trump had "bullied" the country into a new deal (Moore, 2018). Many Canadians were convinced CUSMA was negative for the economy, with a partisan division showing Conservatives as more sceptical as elements of populism creep north (Korzinski, 2018). And Canada is not immune to right populism

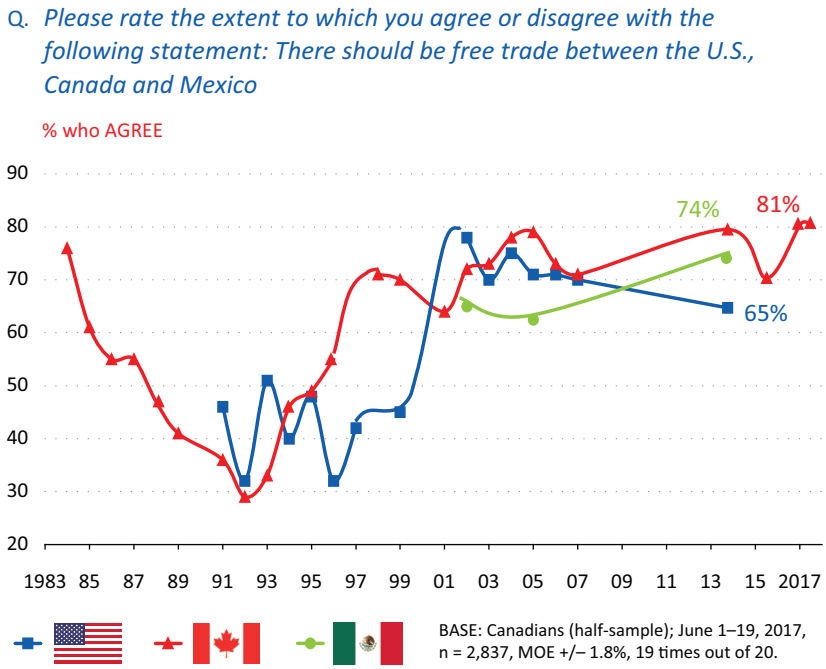

Figure 1. Support for trilateral trade. Source: Graves (2017, p. 17).

driven by "economic stagnation, the growing disparity between the wealthy and the middle and working-classes, a sense that society is headed in the wrong direction and a backlash against the loss of traditional core values" (Graves & Smith, 2020, pp. i–ii). As many as 34% of Canadians ascribed to values akin to Trump and Brexit supporters' scepticism of established liberal institutions, and these moderately affected views of trade liberalisation as well. Commitment to CUSMA and free trade appears weaker among less educated or wealthy persons (Jenkins, 2018). A "future drift toward populism in Canada cannot be ruled out" (Acquaviva et al., 2018, para. 23), given insecurities about economic futures and unease about multiculturalism. Polling also shows a significant, persistent preference for Trump-style populism among Canadian conservatives (Fournier, 2022).

The evolution of the CPC to populism remains to be evaluated; until recently, the party has avoided the extremes of the GOP and UK and European far-right parties (Gillies, 2022, p. 6). The CPC negotiated the Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement with China in 2014 despite being a critic of China's human rights record (Ong, 2020). But the influence of right-populists in the party is evident since the pandemic measures and convoy protests (Gillies, 2022, pp. 7, 12–13). China critics are prominent in the party which spearheaded the revival of Canada–People's Republic of China Relations Committee to address ongoing concerns (Paul, 2020). It is unclear how trade relations with China would fair under a future CPC government, though a more cautious relationship might emerge, given Canadian public wariness of economic relations with China (Angus Reid Institute, 2022). The neoliberal populist consensus which glued the Conservatives under Harper was undone during the electoral defeat in 2015, caused in part by "xenophobic attacks against illiberal Islamic cultural practices and tone-deaf opposition to refugees" (Budd, 2021, p. 171). There is a chance the CPC will join other mainstream conservative parties and "co-opt" populist extremism as an electoral strategy to energise supporters (Gillies, 2022, p. 13). Despite some nativist targeting in critiques of China's rights record and rising economic power, Canadian conservatives and populists remain supportive of trade liberalisation overall. But they approach this from a conventional liberalising approach, not a fair-trade one; how seriously they would act to protect labour and other sustainability concerns remains unclear, especially absent similar supportive efforts in the US.

5. Comparing Populisms: Protectionist vs. Pro-Trade Variants

Canada and the US both provide fertile ground for populists challenging the embedded liberal order as economic insecurity proliferates. However, they remain distinguished by differing leadership orientations with similar framing on some elements of populism but differences in others. In the open, trade-dependent Canadian case, neo-liberal populism has been most prominent. There is a disinclination in this middle power to reject multilateralism or revert to protectionism. Economic asymmetry and political opportunity structures (Budd, 2021) induced variation in rhetoric, with Canadian populists and conservatives (so far) remaining committed to the liberal order embodied in trade regimes. Canadian populists remain pro-free trade, with trade deals with Europe and Asia enjoying public support. In contrast, Trump challenged this order, pushing "America First" alternatives befitting a larger economy with global power status; the US populist movement has espoused more nativism and protectionism, which disrupts agreements like TTIP and TPP and prompted the NAFTA renegotiation. An "America First" conception does not imply entirely turning away from international trade but rather an assertion of power in bargaining to secure concessions on trade matters, for instance, holding Mexico to ILO standards not achieved in "right to work" US states. While CUSMA makes progress in labour rights and fair trade, it may come at a price of legitimising right populism, which still features anti-labour elements and remains anti-equity on race and gender grounds and disregards planetary health and climate change.

Trump also took an aggressive, unilateral position on the use of tariffs as bargaining chips in relationships with traditional allies like Canada and the EU, as well as rivals like China (Tankersley & Bradsher, 2018). Targeted retaliation from trade partners did undermine some of the claimed benefits of this approach, as it ended up costing Americans, especially in Trump-leaning districts (Fetzer & Schwarz, 2021). Trumpism did induce a scepticism of global institutions, such that elements of protectionism became more permanently entrenched (notably withdrawal from TPP and TTIP). While restoring relationships and liberalised tariff levels with most major partners, President Biden kept some measures in place to induce China to increase imports from the US and preserved a more wary self-interested attitude towards that rising power (with some persisting reviews demonstrating ongoing caution). However, support for trade has declined towards pre-Trump levels under Biden (Jones, 2022). Current initiatives on transatlantic trade, such as the EU–US Trade and Technology Council, remain far from the ambitious TTIP that the Obama administration was negotiating (as are Biden's Pacific rim partnerships). Any future trade deals will certainly follow CUSMA in omitting an investor–state dispute settlement component with developed state partners. Meanwhile, further breakthroughs on the labour and social dimension of trade deals remain possible, though the significant gains on CUSMA were only achieved in a unique alliance of the populist Trump and pro-labour Democrats in Congress (with a boost from a progressive Mexican presidency), conditions which are unlikely to be readily replicated.

But on the trade front, Canada, like post-Brexit Britain, as identified by Rodrik (2021), is an instance

where populists do not embrace protectionism. Leadership orientations seem critical here, as Canadian conservatives and populists prefer a neoliberal vision and remain committed to regional and multilateral trade agreements. An awareness of the importance of trade to electoral success and economic growth in this open economy may explain why Canadian populists have not invoked protectionism. Additionally, political opportunity structures and the need for a majority coalition across diverse provinces in the parliamentary system have moderated (so far) the CPC employment of protectionism and nativist othering at the federal level. This could be affected by the behaviour of American populists, however. Gagnon (2020) notes that even American supporters of Canada embraced economic nationalism and expected Canadian compliance with measures affecting economic relationships with China and others. A provision in CUSMA gave the US the right to preview any deals Canada reached with other states and permitted abrogation of CUSMA if the terms of those deals were deemed unacceptable (Gagnon, 2020, pp. 240, 249). If such hardball tactics are revived, Canada might be forced to a defensive protectionist approach. If faith in the US as a reliable trade partner is shaken and if there is a permanent American change in orientation to unilateralism and disregard for Canadian concerns, diversification of trade connections may be essential. Whether this translates into nationalist or protectionist sentiment still seems unlikely, given Canada's high dependence on trade as a component of gross domestic product. While Canadians are warier about the US relationship after Trump, its overall importance is still understood (Kennedy et al., 2020, p. 27).

6. Conclusion: Whither Progressive Trade?

Policymakers face difficult choices in preserving the international and regional trading order. There has been forward momentum improving on the General System of Preference and NAFTA provisions on labour, based on ILO principles with integral disputes settlement around "an enforceable non-derogation clause, prohibiting signatories from lowering their labour standards." (Velut et al., 2022, p. 131). The ineffective consultative model of the NAFTA side agreement has been replaced by a third-generation model with stronger standards and sanctions (Polaski et al., 2022, p. 150). CUSMA's rapid response mechanism does indicate the potential for populist-driven transformation to assist labour advancement in partner states, though not ending limitations to collective bargaining in subnational federal jurisdictions in the US itself where right-to-work initiatives are, in fact, spreading. Certainly, labour and fair-trade advocates have welcomed the forward momentum in CUSMA for its early success in pressing for independent union representation in Mexico (DiCaro & Macdonald, 2022). While the potential exists for improvements in labour elements of trade agreements, ultimately, "effective use of all existing trade-labor linkage instruments still ultimately depends upon the political will of governments to use them" (Polaski, 2022, p. 217).

Overall, the ineffective application of the labour and social clauses of trade deals and the side-lining of fair-trade commitments have provided fodder for protectionist populism. To an extent, critics unfairly blame regional trade deals for the decline of working and middle-class opportunities, as globalisation and technological change matter more. Right populism provides only a salve of nostalgia for better times and not actual relief from economic distress. And, leavened with the targeting of others in minority and immigrant communities, it creates a dangerous combination which will not offset the status decline many face in globalisation. In fact, the populist right cornering of this rhetorical space creates substantial challenges:

> The limited capacity of governments to effectively attenuate political grievances among those adversely affected by relentless technological progress highlights the strategic disadvantage of responsible center-right or center-left parties in contemporary democracy. It renders post-industrial societies vulnerable to political forces responding to voters on the grounds of less tangible identity politics, which are difficult to counter with mundane, precise, and politically feasible policy reactions. (Kurer, 2020, p. 1826)

In the US context, a future return to GOP dominance in Congress could embolden a populism which is both anti-union and pro-labour "flexibility" (Republican Platform, 2016, p. 5) and is also problematic on issues of racial, gender, and class equity and environmental sustainability—enhancing trends of middle-class decline.

This could further contribute to democratic decline, aggravated by voter suppression and partisanship, which are undermining Democratic competitiveness in many red states and eventually in the Senate and the Electoral College as well. Shifting political landscapes and the rise of right corporate-backed populism may not provide a strong basis for substantial improvements in enforceable labour protections in trade agreements. If the undermining of American democracy, rule by court fiat, and spread of right populism continue, and a populist GOP controls the branches of the US government in the future, the outcomes for progressive adjustments to the global order may become more remote. And the costs of making progress on adjustments to labour rights in some partner states will become quite high, including compromises with unpalatable elements of xenophobic, regressive populism, which could work against social and ecological sustainability goals overall.

In Canada, strong populist governments at the provincial level—some neo-liberal and some motivated by social conservatism—could fragment the polity and weaken commitment to liberal values and institutions, even if populist nativism remains more muted at the federal level.

Canadian populist governments would still face a more bilateral orientation by the Americans as the weaker partner in an asymmetrical trading relationship; this might induce a more defensive, protectionist approach in Canada. Populist trends in the federal Conservative Party and in some provinces suggest this future is not necessarily far away (Graves & Smith, 2020), especially in the wake of the era of "freedom convoys" (Gillies, 2022).

Policymakers may need to eschew conventional free trade agreements and develop regional and global arrangements which provide broader benefits to make fewer people feel insecure and at risk. Kolben (2021) may be correct that governments need to accept a slower pace of negotiating and implementing agreements to address the populist backlash. And economic compensation may not be sufficient as well since the middle-class decline is linked in populist rhetoric to broad social and cultural changes breeding insecurity:

> Scholars and policymakers must be informed by an approach to addressing the losers of trade that recognizes that some losses and transitions may not be compensable, that values membership in stable communities, and that acknowledges the political resistance to the cosmopolitan ideals that are dominant among policy elites. (Kolben, 2021, p. 702)

Rodrik (2007, p. 4) has long urged an "alternative approach to globalization…[to] focus on enhancing policy space rather than market access, and on devising the rules of the game to better manage the interface between national regulatory and social regimes."

Ehrlich and Gaghan (2023) argue for strengthening the sustainability and labour elements of trade deals to diminish progressive, fair-trade opposition. The question remains: Will such adjustments counter right, protectionist populism, which erodes support for transnationalism? Verbeek (2022, p. 116) notes that, because of its "constructed and negotiated nature," embedded neoliberalism permits the co-optation of fair-trade arguments through adjustments like the EU's investor court system, which revives "political support and legitimacy for continued transnational market expansion and investment protection." This weakens progressivism and continues trends of economic decline and insecurity, helping sustain populism going forward. As Rodrik (2018) has warned, the balance between globalisation, democracy, and market capitalism may need to be reset, given the neo-liberal emphasis on the global and capital at the expense of welfare for many in the working and middle classes. A reordering of the global order may be required to recognise nation-states' primacy in regulatory policy, and measures may be required to deny trade privileges to states engaging in unfair trade through lax labour standards. Changes are essential to prevent the erosion of the legitimacy of the global trading system (Rodrik, 2018, p. 210). Whether progressive, fair-trade adjustments to social elements of trade agreements will be sufficient to offset populist backlash against liberalisation and globalisation remains to be seen, but fully restoring the nuanced balances of embedded liberalism seems unlikely since, in some countries, protectionist populism seems to be here to stay.

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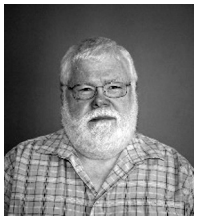

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