

"America First" puts global neighbors last

It's not new for politicians to talk a lot about American jobs. But their nationalistic fervor is troubling.

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International trade is a central issue in this year's presidential election, with particular focus on the Trans-Pacific Partnership under consideration by Congress. The TPP is a complex trade agreement between the United State and 11 Pacific Rim countries. In development for ten years, it includes more than 30 chapters and aims to cut 18,000 different tariffs. Candidates have not delved into the particulars; in this election year, the TPP is simply a powerful symbol of global trade that threatens American jobs.

Donald Trump has blamed trade agreements like the TPP for the loss of American jobs and promises that an "America First" policy can get American workers a better deal. "A Trump Administration will end [the war on the American worker] by getting a fair deal for the American people. The era of economic surrender will finally be over."

Pushed on the issue by Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton has voiced her own reservations about TPP and vowed to take a hard line on trade. "I will do everything

in my power to defend American jobs and American workers. Any trade deal must meet three tests to earn my support: it must create good American jobs, raise wages, and advance our national security.”

Although it’s not new for candidates to focus on creating and preserving American jobs, the nationalistic fervor of the debate on trade gives us pause. Before the 1980 election, Ronald Reagan encouraged voters to consider their own personal economic situation when they cast their vote, urging them to ask themselves, “Am I better off now than I was four years ago?” That individualistic focus was shortsighted, for it ignored an equally relevant question: “How are my neighbors doing?”

In a similar way, it’s shortsighted to ask only how American workers are doing without also asking how our global neighbors are doing. Global trade is complex, but the goal should be the mutual benefit of the people in all countries involved. When the United States uses Mexico as a place to sell surplus corn—something allowed under the North American Free Trade Agreement—it’s a benefit to American farmers but it undercuts Mexican farmers. When trade creates manufacturing jobs in Mexico, it can expand Mexican workers’ opportunities and can play a role in stabilizing the country—but it can also raise questions about the quality and fairness of those jobs. Trade can be a powerful vehicle for lifting people out of poverty if accompanied by rules to protect workers’ rights and the environment.

Given the many elements of global trade—including national differences in resources, worker skills, labor supply, markets, and political and social conditions—the terms of mutually beneficial trade can’t be reduced to a bumper sticker. They certainly can’t be reduced to the slogan “America First.”

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