

Trade as Villain: The Fading American Dream and Declining Support for Globalization

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“Globalization...has left millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache...Skilled craftsmen and tradespeople and factory workers have seen the jobs they love shipped thousands and thousands of miles away...I want you to imagine a much better life and a life where you can believe in the American dream again.”

—Donald Trump, June 28, 2016¹

1 Introduction

Americans’ aspirations have suffered greatly alongside globalization. Job insecurity, wage stagnation and growing inequality are breeding fears among Americans that they may never achieve the same economic success as their parents, and that their children may have even less. This loss of confidence in the American way of life is consequential, and has affected attitudes on a large range of issues. Pundits may still see the “American Dream” as emblematic of US society, but various polls indicate many Americans are finding it more difficult to see that ‘Dream’ playing out in their own life circumstances. To better understand how these aspirations influence attitudes, we look closely at variation in beliefs among Americans about the efficacy of trade policy. We find that Americans divide on their veracity of belief in the American Dream, and that this difference is a predictor of views on the globalized world.

Why look at trade policy? Few foreign policy decisions in Washington have as great an impact on jobs and wages as does trade policy. Yet, the current contestation over trade and globalization

¹<https://time.com/4386335/donald-trump-trade-speech-transcript/>

caught many analysts by surprise. While no issue was more central to 19th century politics, subsequently, trade policy engendered limited controversy. For a century, the public, when asked, mostly supported trade liberalization efforts; among subgroups who disfavored trade, concerns over international economic competition did not fall along an exclusively partisan divide. Yet trade politics once again emerged as an arena of dispute as the US approached the 21st century. Public opinion became less predictably supportive of globalization and by the 2016 election, the distribution of preferences had gone through a sea change, igniting both intra-party and inter-party polarization.

We offer an explanation for both the timing and degree of this current polarization over trade issues, building on insights that have been offered by other analysts on the source of cross-sectional differences in support for globalization. One group of these scholars has stressed the importance of economic self-interest, arguing for the need to better understand the particularistic effects of liberalization on different groups. But being on the losing, or winning, end of global trade does not consistently predict attitudes toward open markets. As a result, other scholars have opined that individuals are better viewed as attached to their communities. In support, a number of studies find that protectionist beliefs can be explained by sociotropic, nativist or simply out-group antipathy. These newer studies maintain that sociotropic-type factors dominate and counter the force of underlying economic interests.

We suggest that scholars need not pick one or the other of these explanations for trade attitudes. Economic self-interest surely matters; as well, interests reflect perceptions of community well-being. We draw insights from both but argue that neither has paid sufficient attention to the individualized experience of growing inequality in the US and the concomitant decline in absolute inter-generational mobility. This, we believe, has increased the public's sensitivity to elite messaging on the benefits and costs of globalization. Drawing on research in political science, behavioral economics and social psychology, we contend that individuals' angst about their, or their children's, prospective lack of income mobility—rather than a simple measure of economic endowment—predicts who will and will not become critical of trade policy.

To be clear, we are not the first to recognize that a central aspect of an individual's economic endowment that shapes political concerns is the prospect of upward mobility: social scientists have long recognized that social mobility prospects play a crucial role in shaping political attitudes,

especially towards the fairness of markets. But such attitudes may be particularly relevant now. Chetty and his co-authors find that growing inequality is manifest in a decline in absolute inter-generational mobility, a defining feature of the “fading American Dream” (Chetty et al., 2017). Their findings are in accordance with Pew surveys that individuals are currently less optimistic about their children’s future standard of living than in the past (Pew, 2012).

We suggest that in this environment, trade policy has become a convenient scapegoat, with elites across the ideological divide suggesting that global forces explain economic constraints. Indeed, it has become common in recent years for policymakers from both parties to publicly and privately question the fundamentals of US trade policy and its impacts on local jobs. In this sense, elite cues on the distributional effects of trade are uniquely consensual, as compared to the deep partisan divide seen on many other economic issues. The more trade is labeled by both parties as the villain, the less the general public needs to know about the real distributional consequences of trade and how that affects their economic interests.

While growing mobility concerns are central to our explanation of anti-globalization attitudes, we hypothesize that not all individuals will react the same way to elite messaging on trade. Rather, groups holding strong ideological commitments to meritocracy will be the most responsive to negative trade cues. Meritocratic individuals are strong believers in principles of the American Dream; they expect an economic system that rewards individuals for hard work, ability and effort, rather than wealth, social class, or group identity. These individuals, or ‘meritocrats’, expect that their efforts should lead to economic mobility and they discount factors outside of their control such as luck, family wealth and connections. Economic hard times for these individuals cause them to seek explanation; we anticipate that the downwardly mobile meritocrats (‘anxious meritocrats’) will be the most sensitive to the elite message that trade is to blame for the bleak labor market. Trade policy provides an easy explanation to this group for the perceived loss of coveted jobs and a specific target for whom to blame for the loss, that is, the less-qualified and ‘lazy’ outsider groups. In short, we suggest that the effect of a lack of prospective mobility on those with meritocratic priors is to make them highly susceptible to a populist cue. The self perceived hard workers who aspire to, but fail to reach, the “American Dream” are the subset who will be most open to blaming international trade.

To evaluate this argument, we collected and analyzed data from several different original

sources. First, we draw upon an original panel data set with repeat-observations of the same individual respondents as a way to measure the degree to which attitudes have shifted among our meritocratic respondents. We estimate changes in views over free trade using different panels, and among the same individuals. Our objective is to assess if and how there was a pronounced shift in attitudes away from global integration among a select group, while preferences over free trade grew gradually more favorable for all groups post Great Recession.

Second, we examine whether the subgroup most susceptible to elite cues on globalization is comprised of individuals with particular underlying beliefs about the requisites of individual economic success. Along with others, we confirm that resistance against global integration is activated because individuals seek some explanation for the economic constraints they face. However, our analysis looks more closely at variation across individuals and suggests that a core and heretofore overlooked ideational belief—a commitment to meritocracy that underlies deep penchants for the ‘American Dream’—explains why some individuals (meritocrats) are more open to protectionist sentiment than are others. Responsiveness to elite cues and resistance to globalization is particularly strong when these self-perceived hard workers are pessimistic about their economic futures – i.e., the anxious meritocrats.

Finally, to more directly test the mechanisms by which declining social mobility translates into greater sensitivity to elite frames on trade, we collected additional original data from several experiments to supplement our survey panel data. We primed survey respondents on various factors ostensibly driving economic hardships for US workers and the demise of the American Dream. In addition to trade, we assess how respondents react to other economic variables, such as immigration, automation or rising corporate ‘greed’, wherein less elite consensus exists on their effects on the US labor market and mobility prospects. We find that our meritocratic survey respondents were especially susceptible to a framing that blamed foreign economic policies, rather than any of the other domestic or international economic factors. In addition, consistent with our core theory, we find that these treatment effects are significantly heightened among the economically anxious meritocrats in our sample.

In sum, this study focuses on workers who feel their economic futures are being unjustly punished by ongoing changes in the labor market due to trade. We see this group as a good example of how declining social mobility can undermine support for globalization even amongst those who are

not directly impacted by the international economy. We maintain that groups vary in their “demand” for an explanation for hard economic times and are unequally receptive to pro-protectionist sentiment. The causes of job losses are hard to untangle, making globalization’s perceived “losers” particularly vulnerable to populist logic. Trade as villain provides them an easy explanation for a complex issue. Confirming what Applebaum (2020, 109) has noted in Europe, individuals in the US who have a “disappointment with meritocracy” are also especially attracted to populist logic. Those who are backward looking, wedded to the national folk lore of the existence of the American dream, are the group who are most open to anti-trade rhetoric. It is this nostalgia that has fueled the American critique of globalization.

We organize our study as follows. In the next section we review the extant literature on globalization attitudes and trade, situate our argument about the interaction of attitudes and elite cues, and then introduce the hypotheses to be tested. Following this, we introduce our longitudinal data set and our findings. To support these findings, we then describe our experimental designs and results. Finally, we conclude with some general reflections about culture, economic change and how to better understand the implications of growing economic inequality.

2 Trade Attitudes: What do we Know?

2.1 The Scholarly Record

The initial wave of studies on trade preferences focused on material self-interest as the main source for preferences on trade; this work reflected scholarship that had long assumed that individuals would favor policies aligned with their position in the world economy. To determine economic interest, pollsters drew from either a Heckscher-Ohlin and/or a Ricardo-Viner model to classify respondents. Trade preferences were then correlated with these economic characteristics. Although the prompts used in surveys varied, the fundamental research design was to measure if and when trade preferences were influenced by changes in labor market forces. Specifically, those hurt by trade, our trade “losers,” were expected to more often support protectionist policies.

For the most part, these studies bore out predictions of economic rationality. Owners of relatively scarce factors—low-skilled workers in the US—were less supportive of trade, reflecting greater market risks from low cost producers abroad (Rogowski, 1987; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Mayda

and Rodrik, 2005). Likewise, although to a lesser extent, worker mobility and training mattered. Workers in import-competing industries were less likely to have pro-trade attitudes, given their greater job insecurity (Mayda and Rodrik, 2005; Hays, Ehrlich and Peinhardt, 2005; Hiscox, 2001; Walter, 2010).

Research showed that other market forces influenced attitudes as well. For example, studies revealed a relationship between economic nationalism and competition from China, a result of the wave of products that arrived in the US after China’s accession to the WTO in 2001 (Colantone and Stanig, 2018). Another set of analysts suggested that international competition alone did not explain variation in attitudes and instead argued that the degree of compensation to those who suffer from competition was the link to anti-trade attitudes (Hays, Lim and Spoon, 2019; Burgoon et al., 2018; Pastor and Veronesi, 2018).²

A second wave of scholars disagreed that material interest alone, or even in concert with other factors, determined preferences. Hainmueller and Hiscox (2006), for example, argued that a deeper knowledge of the economic benefits of foreign trade would lead to more positive views of globalization. In their analysis, education is a predictor of attitudes: they find that more college-educated individuals, regardless of whether they are experiencing greater labor market risks, hold favorable opinions of trade. This result opened up a Pandora’s box of possible causes for the relationship. It could be that knowledge itself mattered, that economics courses changed one’s values or it could be that education was a proxy for cosmopolitanism.

The possibility that sociotropic concerns—that is, caring about social and not simply personal utility (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1981)—explained attitudes was a central component of a third wave of analyses on trade attitudes. In this line of thought, individual beliefs are biased by the collective impact of trade, either on the nation as a whole, or to their particular community. The view that sociotropic concerns dominate individual economic circumstance fueled a number of studies on trade and globalization attitudes (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Fordham, 2008; Davidson, Matusz and Nelson, 2012). Moving away from self-interest, these scholars argued that research should privilege national social and/or economic trends over individual economic position.

²Scholars have also determined that even broader political consequences occur when voters are harmed by trade, such as reducing incumbent vote shares, increasing political polarization, rising authoritarian values, and greater support for right-wing populist candidates (e.g., Autor et al. (2020); Ballard-Rosa et al. (2021); Ballard-Rosa, Jensen and Scheve (2021); Hays, Lim and Spoon (2019); Jensen, Quinn and Weymouth (2017)).

Building on this more communitarian view, scholars found that ethnocentrism was also associated with anti-trade attitudes (Margalit, 2012; O’Rourke et al., 2001; Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Mansfield, Mutz and Brackbill, 2019; Guisinger, 2017). Specifically, nativism—or fear of “outsiders”—was shown to be a driver of attitudes on globalization. In multiple studies, nativism and trade were shown to be interconnected.³ According to Mutz (2018), high status groups—white respondents in this study—more often turned against trade and were in support of populist leaders because of a fear of declining status. Trade with countries such as China and India were viewed in zero-sum terms in that they caused job losses; this was then seen as a threat to their sense of dominance. Mutz explains: “When members of a dominant group experience a sense of threat to their group’s position, whether it is the status of Americans in the world at large or the status of whites in a multi-ethnic America, [this] change in people’s sense of their group’s relative position produces insecurity.”⁴ Accordingly, this line of work stressed that a status threat from outgroups could also affect trade attitudes (Margalit, 2012; Guisinger, 2017). In these studies, perceptions matter more than underlying economic forces. Margalit (2012); Owen (2017); Mansfield and Mutz (2013) all find, for instance, that it is perceptions of labor market vulnerabilities, rather than individual losses from trade per se, that drives protectionist sentiment.⁵

These findings leave us with two unanswered questions. First, it is puzzling that scholars who maintain that self-interest and economic hardship matter are unable to explain why the broader electorate changes its views on trade. What explains the seemingly widespread change in views on protectionism? Attitudes seem to have shifted in level, akin to a move of tectonic plates and not in a linear fashion, as expected with a gradual deepening of globalization.

Second, if individuals always fear outsider groups, we still have no answer to the “why now” question. To some extent, the nativist hypothesis provides an explanation for why the broader electorate might embrace protectionism. But, immigration numbers in the US do not track with the growth of anti-nativist attitudes and the backlash towards globalization seems to be poorly predicted by region and partisanship.⁶ Why did more Republicans along with some Democrats

³Among others, this group included: Mutz (2018); Mutz and Kim (2017); Mansfield and Mutz (2009); Guisinger (2017); Inglehart and Norris (2016); Major et al. (2002); Steenvoorden and Hartevelde (2018).

⁴Mutz (2018, page).

⁵For recent accounts that link out-group antipathy, authoritarian values and trade fueled economic decline, see Ballard-Rosa et al. (2021); Ballard-Rosa, Jensen and Scheve (2021).

⁶Mutz (2018) argues that whites were threatened by media reports that minority populations were on the ascendance. However, the Census Bureau projected that whites would drop below the majority in the population in

express protectionist views in the second decade of the 21st century? The answer, we suggest, is tied to a prior question: why do individuals choose to blame trade and not other government policies for economic hard times?

2.2 Why Blame Trade?

The distributional effects of market liberalization are complex.⁷ Not surprisingly, most voters will have a hard time differentiating job losses because of trade competition from ones lost because of plant closings or because of mechanization. Citizens rely on others to interpret these market forces; in times of uncertainty, elite cuing and media reports are key drivers of mass opinion formation (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Zaller, 1992; Carmines and Stimson, 1980). This demand for elite cues is especially evident in periods of economic upheaval, such as during the vast infusion of Chinese products after 2001 or the deep cuts in employment after the 2008 financial crisis. Declining intergenerational mobility is arguably another type of shock that triggers perceptions of risk and uncertainty. Economic shocks are painful and elicit public cries for how and when there will be a return to normalcy.

These negative shocks create dissonance in the workforce, not only because of short term wage loss but because of shifting expectations for future earnings. The US is supposed to be a meritocratic nation; American children are taught a founding story that combines American exceptionalism, the Horatio Alger myth and manifest destiny, in which the US is the nation of unbridled opportunities. Yet, the current state of the US labor market, characterized by rising skill premiums, stagnant wages and unequal opportunity challenges this expectation. This disjuncture between ideals and reality heightens the effect of elite cues on globalization. We maintain that individuals most attached to the ideals of the American merit system and who feel that social mobility is being constrained will be most open to populist cues blaming globalization. It is this group of self-perceived hard workers that we believe are the most prone to accept an anti-trade message.

August 2008, which was the height of Barak Obama's presidential campaign; and the report was rapidly disseminated by media. Nonetheless, Obama went on to become president, and support for trade did not pivot until the beginning of the next presidential campaign cycle in 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/world/americas/14iht-census.1.15284537.html>

⁷For recent evidence on the lack of comprehension by average Americans of trade's consequences, see Rho and Tomz (2017).

Anti-trade rhetoric Anti-globalist commentary increased substantially in the last decades of the 20th century, and since neither party was willing to be seen as the defender of open trade, we suggest that commercial policy began to appear akin to what Stokes (1963) labeled a ‘valence’ issue. Anti-trade, or in particular, anti-trade agreements rhetoric is not entirely new; elites picked up on the negative distributional effects increasingly over the 20th century, for example, in criticism of the original NAFTA agreement, of Japanese trade policy that was said to be “unfair” and since the 1970s, by union leadership who feared low-wage competition. But by the turn of the century, both parties had embraced aspects of the “trade is a problem” message, although not necessarily using the same logic. The left worried about low skill jobs; the right about a loss of American autonomy. While these views were balanced by those who advocated for an internationalist foreign policy in academic circles and among many employed in policy institutes, politicians found the anti-global mantra was a more effective position on the campaign trail. With Chinese entry into the WTO in 2001, the number of cross-partisan political elites critical of aspects of globalization expanded dramatically.

What was said? After 2001, it became increasingly common to hear policy makers suggest that the fundamentals of trade policy were flawed, as evidenced by the dislocation that followed the avalanche of Chinese goods arriving to the American market. As jobs dried up for a host of reasons and companies found themselves unable to prosper, trade policy both past and future became a convenient villain. While economists offered a range of explanations for shifts in the job market, elected leaders rarely agreed with experts that it was more often automation and not trade agreements that had undercut manufacturing jobs. Finding it more convenient to blame global forces, policy makers on the left and right argued that corporations were moving jobs abroad to gain access to underpaid foreign laborers. Both parties advocated the re-shoring of production and the reworking of trade agreements to level the playing field for the American worker.⁸ Thus unlike other foreign policy issues that could be arrayed by party and/or ideology, such as immigration and the ill effects of growing corporate wealth, anti-globalism resonated across the political spectrum:

⁸Trump, Sanders and Clinton, among others, associated trade with US job losses to low wage countries in the 2016 presidential campaign. While Sanders placed more emphasis on the role of multinationals gaining disproportionately from trade, both candidates criticized trade deals—with China in particular—for “sapping” American jobs. Trump was not alone in arguing that trade was a problem for American workers.<https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/senate-speech-by-sen-bernie-sanders-on-unfettered-free-trade>,<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/business/international/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-trade-china.html>

there were political elites on the right, and the left, who believed that the adjudication of trade rules had been mishandled and American workers were bearing the costs. Blaming the trading system was both a convenient, and an easy, explanation for a far more complicated set of variables that explain the changing nature of the US economy.

While not the only political elite to criticize trade policy, Donald Trump amplified and regularized this anti-trade message. Running as an outsider to the Washington establishment, he was unconstrained by earlier Republican party positions; the result was an elevation of internationalism as the cause for a host of domestic problems. Trump's campaign rhetoric connected market constraints with trade policy in a direct and easy to understand manner. As emphasized in the epigraph to this paper, Trump promised to "make America great again" by resurrecting a view of the American Dream in a less-globalized world wherein individual hard work did indeed meet with material success. Along the campaign trail, it became increasingly common to hear that US trade, job losses and the decline in the American standard of living were linked. As example:

"They are taking our jobs. China is taking our jobs. Japan is taking our jobs. India is taking our jobs. It is not going to happen anymore, folks!" (Trump Campaign event, Tennessee, June 14, 2016)

"[I] Will bring back jobs from countries like India, China, Japan and Mexico. ..[W]e came out and we started talking about trade, how were being ripped off with China, ripped off with Japan, ripped off with Mexico at the border and then trade, ripped off by Vietnam, and by India, and by every country." (Trump campaign event in Las Vegas, Nevada on February 22, 2016.)

Yet, while Trump's rhetoric was certainly loudest and most explicit in connecting foreign trade to declining standards of living in the US, he was not alone in making such connections. Indeed, the Democratic party picked up on the message and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign qualified their support for global integration as being balanced by a need to protect American workers; the current Biden administration has not deviated from this mantra. Consider for example the following statement from a Clinton campaign event in Michigan:

"My message to every worker in Michigan and across America is this: I will stop any trade deal that kills jobs or holds down wages, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership...I oppose it now, I'll oppose it after the election, and I'll oppose it as president." (Clinton Campaign Event, August 12, 2016. <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/aug/12/hillary-clinton/economic-speech-hillary-clinton-offers-cherry-pick/>)

In the last days of the Great Recession, this trade-as-villain rhetoric resonated, a reflection of uneven economic growth. Given inter-party differences, it was rare to hear a politician extol the alternative position, that globalization was good for the economy. As result, anti-trade rhetoric dominated the airwaves. It is unsurprising that large parts of the electorate came to associate global integration with declining social mobility and the fading ‘American Dream’. To be sure, policymakers’ attacks on globalization were not confined to commercial policy. Rising corporate wealth in a global economy and immigration policy were often cited, by one side or the other, as a reason for the lagging economy. Trade was unique, however, because it was villainized by members in both parties. As consequence, while we agree that policy views on immigration, automation and/or large corporate profits resonated with some in the electorate, we expect the critique of trade as having a more ubiquitous effect on attitudes.

Mass receptivity to cues Who is open to elite messaging on trade policy? We anticipate that individuals who are concerned about future mobility prospects will be especially sensitive to elite cues on the negative effects of trade, particularly if they hold strong beliefs in meritocracy. Why? Research in political science and behavioral economics suggests that the prospect for social mobility can shape political attitudes. Accordingly, an individual’s view of his/her welfare depends on both the present and the person’s expectations about the future (Hirschman and Rothschild, 1973). In particular, studies have shown that beliefs about their and their children’s economic future, or what behavioral economists refer to as “prospects for upward mobility”, have a particularly strong effect on support for policies and politicians (see Kramer (1983); MacKuen, Erikson and Stimson (1992); Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2000); Benabou and Ok (2001); Alesina and La Ferrara (2005)).⁹

Data suggest that pessimism about prospects for social mobility increased after the turn of the century. In surveys, Pew finds that few Americans (20 percent) predict a better standard of living for their families than they have, looking ahead 30 years. When asked about their prospects for

⁹Select studies in the voting literature in political science also find that prospective pocketbook issues affect policy and candidate choice (Weyland, 1998; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2000; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lacy and Christenson, 2017; Lockerbie, 1992). The bulk of research in this vein, however, focuses on retrospective pocketbook issues, and finds limited effects. In behavioral economics, however, POUM plays a more critical role in political preferences. In particular, intergenerational mobility expectations has an effect on policy preferences such as higher redistribution and taxation (Benabou and Ok, 2001; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Checchi and Filippin, 2004; Fong, 2006; Alesina, Stantcheva and Teso, 2018). Specifically, the POUM hypothesis posits that individuals who expect higher future income and mobility tend to oppose redistribution policies and concomitant taxation.

inter-generational mobility, half of the public say that their children will have a worse standard of living than they do today.¹⁰ This pessimism is not without reason. Chetty et al. (2017) finds that absolute inter-generational mobility fell from 92 percent for children born in 1940 to about 50 percent for children born in the mid 1980s.¹¹ As well, wages for working class families have been basically stagnant, rising only slightly in the second decade of the 21st century.

These effects play into prospective views of the economy and how they will affect future generations, regardless of current income. The US labor market has rapidly changed, now bifurcated between high and low skill workers; each facing a very different job market. Following a period of rapid technological innovation, low-wage, low-skill occupations grew as did high-skill high-wage occupations. Jobs in between, however, contracted (Acemoglu and Autor, 2011; Lee and Clarke, 2019). Workers with post-graduate degrees managed to avoid the negative income effects of the 2008 crisis while the wages of less-educated workers continued to drop.¹² Simultaneously, student debt has been rising, exacerbating income challenges associated with attaining a higher education (Ballard-Rosa, 2019). Annual home ownership rates steadily declined post 2008 recession across all age groups, except for those in the 65 and older group.¹³

Some groups will have a stronger political response to increasing impediments to rapid individual economic success. The most reactive individuals will be those that hold core ideological beliefs in meritocracy. These individuals believe that hard work, individual abilities and effort determine labor mobility and financial success, rather than factors outside individual control such as luck, family wealth and connections. Those who hold strong meritocratic beliefs, those that we label “meritocrats,” see themselves as talented and hardworking, and thereby, deserving of labor market success. Their expectation is that outputs will and should match their inputs in a competitive market economy (Knowles and Lowery, 2012). No myth is as powerfully American as is the belief in upward mobility via hard work. In the US, the Horatio Alger story is emblematic of American

¹⁰<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/03/21/public-sees-an-america-in-decline-on-many-fronts>. Also see Wolak and Peterson 2020), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/22/the-lost-decade-of-the-middle-class/>

¹¹They define the rate of absolute mobility as the fraction of children earning more than their parents in real terms and at the same age. Absolute mobility measures are more visible to the mass public since it measures how your income compares to your parents (rather than whether you moved into a different quintile, since one may not know the different quintiles that they- or their parents- occupy).

¹²Over the last four decades, less educated workers have experienced a 24.4 percent fall in wages (Donovan and Bradley, 2020) and median wages for workers with a bachelor’s degree stagnated after 2000 (Donovan and Bradley, 2020).

¹³<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/08/homeownership-by-age.html>

exceptionalism. The discord between outcomes and hard work demands explanation and that is the attraction to anti-globalism ideas.

Why are our meritocrats especially sensitive to this elite cue? Meritocrats interpret the national myth as one of individual responsibility; if you work hard, everything is attainable in America (Son Hing, Bobocel and Zanna, 2002). They view, for example, that the poor and other marginalized groups are less-hardworking and wholly responsible for their lack of achievement.¹⁴ As Alain de Botton has noted, “If the successful merited their success, it necessarily followed that the failures had to merit their failure...Low status came to be seen not merely [as] regrettable but also deserved” (pg. 66). Indeed, individuals holding meritocratic beliefs tend to resist affirmative action and welfare policies.¹⁵ Given these attitudes, it is unsurprising that they would find the elite message that trade unfairly favors outsiders compelling. They have worked hard yet success has eluded them.

Viewed holistically, the attitudes our meritocrats currently hold on open trade—in response to ongoing elite cuing—could be seen as a variant of views on welfare and affirmative action. In all three, market outcomes are unjustly rewarding those who do not work as hard and are less deserving (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Harrison et al., 2006).¹⁶ It would be a mistake, however, to assume that only conservatives are meritocrats; research finds that individuals from different social classes and political parties endorse the principles of meritocracy (McCoy et al., 2013; Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004; Ghosh, 2013).

¹⁴See, for example, Jost and Hunyady (2005); Ledgerwood et al. (2011); McCoy and Major (2007); McCoy et al. (2013); Zimmerman and Reyna (2013).

¹⁵Ballard-Rosa, Martin and Scheve (2017) document that individuals with strong beliefs in American meritocracy also prefer much less progressivity in income taxes.

¹⁶Empirical studies have found that meritocrats tend to be high status, most commonly identified by ethnicity (white) and gender (male) (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Major and O’Brien, 2005; Reynolds and Xian, 2014). This is because beliefs in meritocracy and individual supply of effort are mutually reinforcing (Ball et al., 2001), and this tends to persist across generations (Piketty, 1995). Perhaps more importantly, meritocrats likely because of their high status- also face less discrimination (Knowles et al. 2014, Federico and Sidanius, 2002), reinforcing their dynastic beliefs in meritocracy and their rightful place in the social hierarchy (Piketty, 1995; Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004). As McCoy and Major (2007) put it “If the status hierarchy is based on merit, the logical inference is that those who have higher status must also be more talented, valuable, hardworking, or in other ways more meritorious than those who have lower status.” Their tendency is to respond more positively to people from their ingroup, and dismiss others (outgroups) as inferior and less deserving (e.g, Tajfel and Turner 1986, Levin, Van Laar and Sidanius 2003, Biernat et al. 1996).

2.3 Operationalizing the Argument

Our expectations for rising anti-globalization sentiments can now be summarized. Given a long-standing belief in the prospects for inter-generational mobility in the US, the absence of upward mobility spurred individuals to search for an explanation for the disconnect between mobility expectations and current circumstance. This created a pool of people who were open to elite cues on the cause of their economic circumstance. Globalization and especially trade policy was offered by elites as that explanation. Given that it is difficult for the average citizen to know with any certainty how trade will affect their individual economic well being, the notion that trade policy was to blame became widely accepted among a target audience.

Hypothesis 1. *Elite cues blaming trade for the fading American Dream will reduce support for free trade.*

Individuals who see themselves as hard working and believe that the market is not going to reward them—or their children—for their efforts are our target audience. We believe that this is a group that will be especially open to an elite narrative blaming foreign trade for the perceived dearth of mobility opportunities. Having been socialized to believe in the American Dream, these “meritocrats” externalize their disappointment. We can contrast this group with another: individuals who believe that luck, connections, and family history determine success. These are our non-meritocrats and we suggest that they will be less responsive to elite cues on the negative effects of trade on labor markets, even when experiencing similar economic constraints.

Hypothesis 2. *Meritocrats will be more sensitive than non-meritocrats to elite cues blaming trade, especially when trade is said to undermine the American Dream.*

Those with the greatest dissonance will be meritocrats who anticipate unfavorable intergenerational mobility. These workers will be acutely sensitive to elite cues that blame trade for having created a fundamental unfairness in the domestic market, which adversely impacts their families. Combining these effects, we anticipate that anxious meritocrats will be the most susceptible to elite messaging on trade.

Hypothesis 3. *Meritocrats with low mobility expectations will be the most responsive group to elite cues blaming trade for the fading American Dream.*

3 Data Analysis

We assess these hypotheses with two different sources of data. First, we look at a repeat-observation panel survey of Americans, beginning in 2007 and running through 2016.¹⁷ The survey was administered to a nationally-representative sample of Americans by YouGov. The survey includes a subset of the same respondents across time, creating a panel. We also collected substantial data from the survey on the other respondents facilitating both cross sectional and longitudinal analysis.¹⁸ While our first data source allows us to differentiate among respondents’ views of trade, our second data source, a series of survey experiments, allows us to assess the effect of different elite cues on different populations.

3.1 Panel results

We begin with a straightforward evaluation of the trade attitudes of our respondents over time. Looking at our data, it appears—contra some claims that Americans do not change their views over free trade—that the average level of support for trade has varied noticeably over the past decade. As a measure of generalized preferences over free trade, survey respondents were asked “Overall, do you think trade with other countries should be expanded, reduced, or kept at its current level?” Respondents could select answers ranging from “reduced greatly” to “expanded greatly” on a five point scale, with a three corresponding to a preference to keep trade at current levels. Figure 1 reports the simple average annual level of support for this question. As can be seen in the figure, overall views on trade among the US population improved over the course of economic recovery from the Great Recession, before dropping significantly again in 2016.¹⁹

While the trend in these data is consistent with other measures of the improving economy, the dip in 2016 is harder to explain as simply a reaction to the post-recession job market.²⁰ We therefore focus on the shift between these two years to explore whether the dip is attributable to the rise of anti-trade rhetoric by 2016 presidential candidates (per H1). Both Donald Trump and

¹⁷Surveys were administered in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2016.

¹⁸Because of nine year span, the panel participant data thinned out. We have a good overlap of the group between 2007 and 2010 and then again, between 2012 and 2016, as reported in the tables below. We report here on only a small part of the survey results. The survey itself included detailed analysis of wages, employment sector and data on other members of the family, that is, the relative earning of each member of the household.

¹⁹Of course, this decline in trade preferences was not uniform across different groups; in particular, many previously pro-trade Republicans dramatically shifted towards protectionism, as we document below.

²⁰Indeed, the unemployment rate stood at 8.1% in 2012, as compared to 4.9% in 2016.

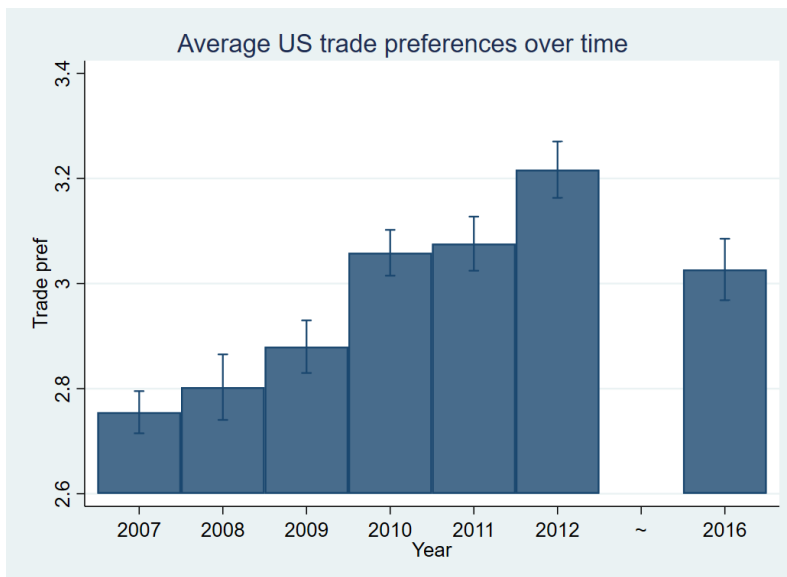


Figure 1: Average American trade preferences over time. *Note that survey data were not collected from 2013-2015.*

Bernie Sanders, in particular, repeatedly criticized trade with other countries as responsible for a host of current domestic economic problems. We begin by asking whether or not individuals varied in their propensity to internalize that message.

Who are meritocrats? We believe that these shifts in trade views in response to elite cutting should have been particularly pronounced among certain groups of Americans, those we call “meritocrats” (H2); the confluence of a belief in the American market coupled with personal dissatisfaction with social mobility should make “anxious meritocrats” susceptible to a narrative linking declines in the American Dream to trade with foreign nations (H3). To identify our meritocrats, we follow existing literature and asked our respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: “People are poor because they do not work hard enough.” We argue that agreeing with this statement is consistent with seeing success as an attribute of hard work (or, conversely, that poverty is due to lack of hard work). If an individual believes strongly that hard work should lead to success, we label the respondent a ‘meritocrat.’

While being a meritocrat is often associated with partisanship, there still exist non-trivial numbers of Democrats (6%) and Independents (29%) who agree with the statement that the poor do not work hard enough; in addition, while support for this view is strongest among Republicans (55%), even among this group nearly half of respondents disagree with the statement, suggesting

that this view is not equivalent to partisan identity. As described in Table 9 in the Appendix, we find that wealthier white men without a post-graduate degree are most likely to agree that individuals are poor due to a lack of hard work. Given this non-random variation in meritocratic views, we control for these covariates in our subsequent analyses.

To assess whether meritocrats are driving the drop in trade support in 2016, we regressed individual views on trade on this measure of “meritocracy beliefs,” as well as a standard battery of controls for age, gender, race, education, income and partisanship. In addition, since we believe that the trade-is-destroying-the American Dream frame offered explicitly by Trump should have been particularly salient for meritocrats, we included an interaction between our meritocracy belief measure and the year in which the survey was administered, with the expectation that the relationship between meritocracy views and trade preferences should be significant correlated in 2016 as a result of elite messaging during the presidential campaign. As reported in Figure 2, while there was some evidence of an overall decline from 2012 to 2016 in views over free trade among respondents who believe that poverty is a result of circumstances (nonmeritocrats), this decline is dwarfed by the fall in preferences over free trade among meritocratic respondents.²¹

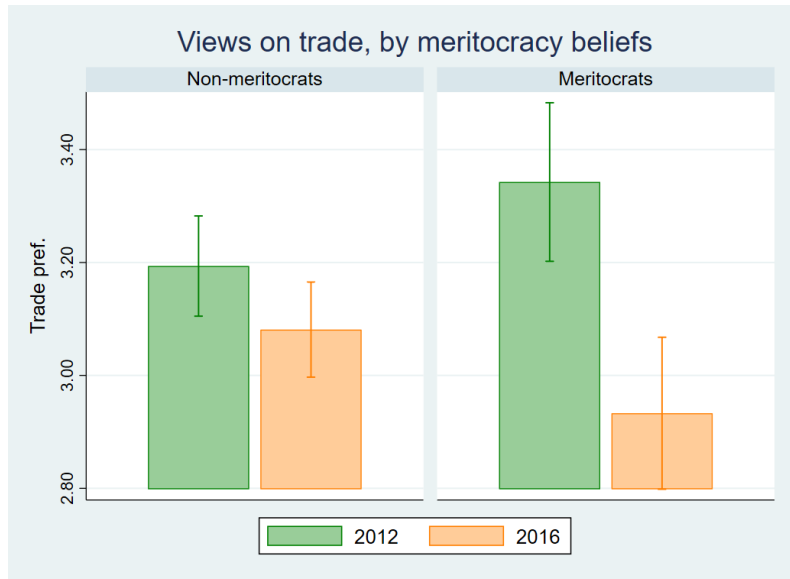


Figure 2: Trade preferences in 2012 vs 2016, by meritocracy beliefs.

“Anxious Meritocrats” While this demonstrates a shift in trade preferences among those who believe the market should reward hard work (H2), we believe that it should be meritocrats

²¹Explicit regression output for this analysis, and for those following, is reported in Appendix A.

anticipating declining social mobility who are the most susceptible to an anti-trade narrative in 2016 (H3). The belief that those who work hard will and should get ahead is often joined with a second expectation about economic prospects, that is, the assumption that they, or their children, will exceed their current economic class. To identify this second subgroup, we look at respondents' perceptions of social mobility, based on the following question: "Do you think your children will be financially better off than you are, when they are your age?"²² Individuals who think that their children will be better off financially continue to believe in the possibility of social mobility; we characterize these respondents as having high "intergenerational mobility expectations" (IME). In contrast, we identify those respondents who do not expect their children's financial situation to improve as having low IME.

We evaluate H3 by interacting our measures of MERITOCRATIC BELIEFS and INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY EXPECTATIONS; as above, we allow for this effect to vary across time by also interacting these effects with survey year. As reported in Figure 3, it is indeed precisely those meritocrats who did not believe that their children would do better who demonstrate the most marked decline in trade preferences.²³ We believe that this reflects the bipartisan attacks on trade in the media and by presidential candidates, and test the effect of different prompts more directly in our experiments in the next section.

These initial results document average changes over time, looking at all respondents who answered the question in (at least) one of the survey waves. In order to highlight the particular role of social mobility threats and meritocracy beliefs, we leverage a unique strength of these over-time repeat observation data by estimating within-respondent change in trade views from 2012 to 2016. This is a particularly conservative test of our theory, as it relies specifically on individual-level change in political views, which is often argued to be difficult to detect.²⁴ More precisely, we estimate (for the sub-sample of respondents present in both survey years) the change in a given respondent's views over free trade from 2012 to 2016, and regress this within-respondent change on an interaction between our social mobility and meritocracy beliefs measures, as well as the full set of individual-level controls.²⁵ As reported in Figure 4, when limiting ourselves only to those

²²Answers to this ranged on a 5 point scale.

²³There are also declines, of smaller magnitude, for non-meritocrats concerned about social mobility as well as meritocrats with high IME.

²⁴See Mutz (2018) for further elaboration on this point.

²⁵There are some respondents who were present in the 2011 and 2016 wave but did not respond to the 2012 wave;

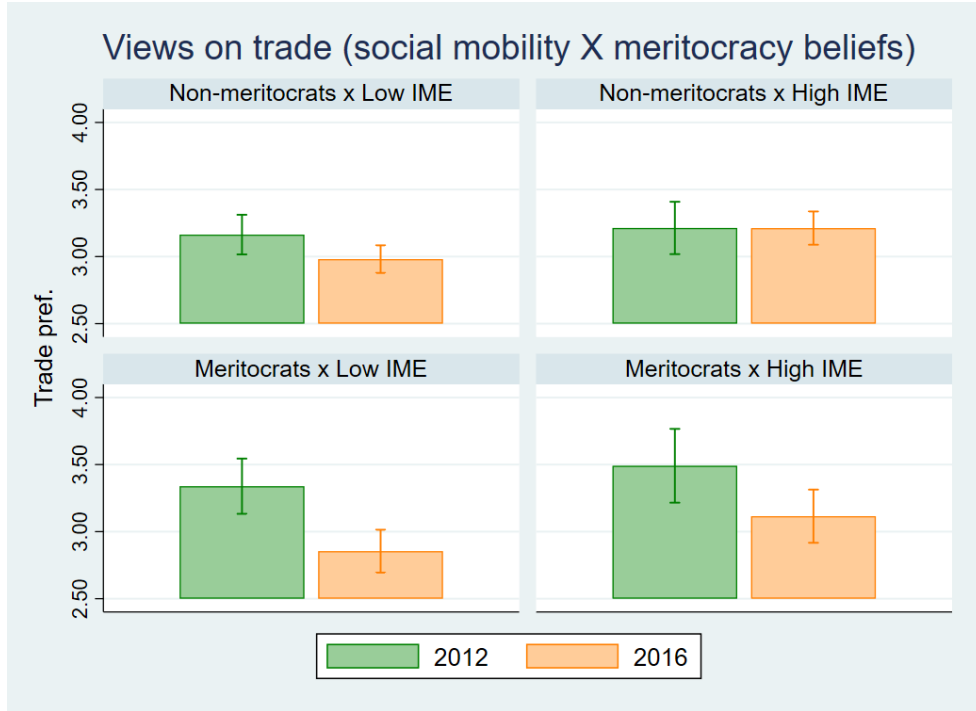


Figure 3: Trade preferences in 2012 vs 2016, by meritocracy beliefs and social mobility. Note: “IME” = intergenerational mobility expectations.

respondents with repeated observations, we indeed find that it was the economically-anxious meritocrats who demonstrated a statistically significant decline in their views over free trade in 2016, providing strong support for our account that this was the group most susceptible to Trump’s narrative linking foreign trade with threats to the American Dream.²⁶

Having identified changes in views on free trade over time and within individuals consistent with our core account, we still cannot rule out a number of alternative accounts. Indeed, while different parties sent similar messages on trade’s negative effects in the 2016 election, many additional factors may have changed in respondents’ lives from 2012 to 2016. To provide more evidence for our argument, we look directly at elite messaging, reporting on findings from a series of original survey experiments we conducted in 2019 and 2020. Having demonstrated observational evidence consistent with our main hypotheses, these experiments provide us with causal leverage to compare our hypothesis with other explanations in the literature for trade attitudes.

in order to supplement our sample size we add these respondents to the analysis by calculating the change in their views on trade from 2011 to 2016.

²⁶As reported in Appendix B.1, we additionally find that those who changed their views on trade to become more protectionist were significantly more likely to vote for Donald Trump in 2016, even after controlling for a host of additional demographic factors.

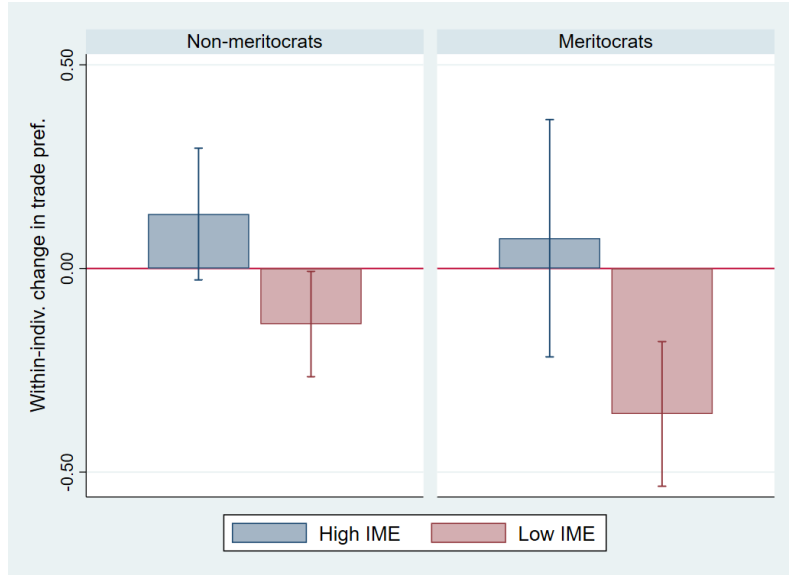


Figure 4: Within-respondent change in trade beliefs, by meritocracy beliefs and social mobility. Note: “IME” = intergenerational mobility expectations.

3.2 Assessing the Causal Mechanism: Elite Cues on Trade and the Fading American Dream

Our survey data illustrate that there was an asymmetric decline in pro-free trade attitudes. Although general support for open trade declined for all groups, those who were anxious meritocrats shifted most dramatically. The general decline is unsurprising: political elites and Trump in particular repeatedly argued that economic problems were the result of trade taking US jobs and destroying the American Dream. But why do our anxious meritocrats respond to this message more than others? To explain why this group was sensitive to this message, we connect elite cueing on trade to public response via a set of experimental procedures. Specifically, we first assess the causal mechanism driving the rise of anti-globalization sentiment, and then analyze which subgroup is most sensitive to this message.

3.2.1 Assessing Effectiveness of the American Dream Anti-Trade Narrative

To assess whether a particular elite cue on the effect of globalization (H1) triggered a decline in trade support, we compare responses to a number of different possible explanations in an experimental setting. Our argument is that cross-partisan messages linking trade to labor market distress and threats to the American Dream will be particularly effective in increasing anti-globalization re-

sponses. Comparatively, other messages on the reason for the challenging economic environment—such as corporate wealth and/or inequality—we argue, are less likely to have the same effect. To determine whether our intuition is correct, we assess whether the globalization-causing-declining American Dream prime impacts trade (or immigration) preferences more than a globalization-causing-corporate wealth prime.

In our first experiment we do this by randomly assigning respondents to one of two possible narratives. The first primes respondents on the anti-trade narrative linking globalization with labor market shocks and the decline of the American Dream; the second focuses on linking globalization with growing wealth of corporate elites and expanding inequality. This experiment was administered to a nationally-representative sample of 2,000 US respondents in May 2019 by Yougov. Respondents received one of these two anti-globalization narratives and were then asked to give their preferences on several political outcomes, including trade and immigration.²⁷

The first frame focused on globalization as a threat to the American Dream (AD), and read: “Some US foreign economic policies have moved our jobs overseas and left millions of hard-working Americans unable to provide for their families and live out the American Dream.” We expected that this information would prime respondents to link foreign economic policies with declining US social mobility; we do not explicitly mention trade and so it is likely that this is a lower-bound estimate of the effect of more explicitly anti-trade messaging, such as that put forward by Trump. The second prompt instead linked globalization to rising “inequality” (IQ) in the US: “Some US foreign economic policies have only been good for the rich and heads of large corporations, increasing wealth and income inequality in the country.” Put simply, both frames presented global integration in a negative light – what differed across the two treatment groups was the degree to which hard working Americans are explicitly described as suffering from global forces.

As displayed in Table 1, we do find that—among all respondents on average—exposure to the AD frame reduced support for trade (H1).²⁸ Importantly, the AD effect holds despite “trade” never being mentioned in the prompt. It is plausible that respondents could have been thinking of a different “foreign economic policy” from this frame, such as immigration policy, for example. However, as shown in column 2, there was no effect of the AD treatment on respondents’ preferences

²⁷Wording for the trade support question was identical to that described above.

²⁸More precisely, relative to support among respondents exposed to the IQ frame, respondents exposed to the AD frame demonstrated a statistically significant increase in their preference to reduce trade.

VARIABLES	(1) Reduce Trade	(2) Reduce Immigration
AD treatment	0.121** (0.049)	0.072 (0.058)
Observations	1,996	1,989
R-squared	0.003	0.001

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 1: Baseline treatment effects

over restricting immigration, suggesting that framing losses due to the declining American Dream is, indeed, central to views about trade and not simply any foreign economic policy (such as immigration).²⁹ We are not surprised by this; as discussed earlier, anti-trade rhetoric—specifically rooted in trade’s negative effects on the US labor market—had rare elite, bipartisan consensus over the last decade and particularly, the last presidential campaign. This was not the case for policies related, for example, to immigration.

Anxious Meritocrats Having demonstrated causal evidence for our hypothesis that elite messaging linking international economic activity to declines in the American Dream reduces general levels of support for international trade across the population on average, we next turn to analysis of those subgroups we expect to be most sensitive. Figure 5 displays the results of the interaction of our AD treatment dummy with a measure of beliefs about meritocracy.³⁰ We find that there is a strongly positive and statistically significant reduction in preferences over free trade among meritocrats exposed to the AD treatment; among non-meritocrats there is no appreciable treatment effect, lending support to our primary hypothesis that this set of beliefs makes Americans particularly sensitive to elite messaging on the effects of trade on the American Dream.

More tellingly, we see that meritocrats who also worry about declining intergenerational mobility (“anxious meritocrats,” per H3) are the most open to the frame. As displayed in Figure 6, respondents who answered on our pre-survey that they were worried about the financial mobility of their children (those with low “intergenerational mobility expectations”) are the ones who are

²⁹As we discuss in greater detail below, it is also not the case that AD cues trigger generalized concern about any threat to the labor market – for instance, the AD frame had no appreciable effects on preferences over limiting automation in the workforce.

³⁰Wording for this question, and for views on social mobility, was identical to that above.

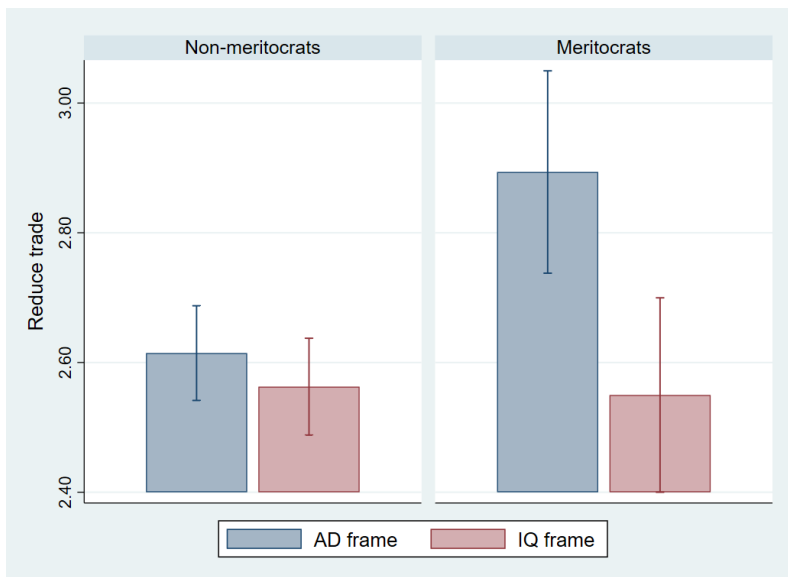


Figure 5: Average trade preferences by treatment condition and meritocracy beliefs.

most influenced by the prompt. As predicted by our account, opposition to trade is noticeably more pronounced among these economically anxious meritocrats.³¹

3.3 Alternative explanations

Having now seen in our observational and experimental data striking evidence for our core hypotheses, we investigate other possible sources for these attitudes offered in earlier studies.

3.3.1 Are job losses from automation driving the loss in support for globalization?

While above we have demonstrated that linking foreign economic policies to threats to the American Dream significantly increased opposition to trade, it is possible that any economic shock could lead to anti-trade attitudes. For instance, it might be that any threat to economic wellbeing and the American Dream could stimulate a demand for forms of government “protection” among respondents; trade limits might simply be one manifestation of this.³² To assess this alternative possibility, in a second experiment we considered how respondents reacted to a prompt comparing job losses from trade as against one emphasizing job losses from greater automation. Research has

³¹Note that we also detect a positive treatment effect for meritocrats who do not believe that their children will do worse; however, as can be seen in the figure, this group’s total preference for trade reduction is still below that of anxious meritocrats in the “IQ” frame, and is significantly lower than anxious meritocrats in the “AD” frame.

³²For example, Mansfield, Mutz and Brackbill (2019) discuss this as one potential reason why trade preferences declined among the US population following the Great Recession.

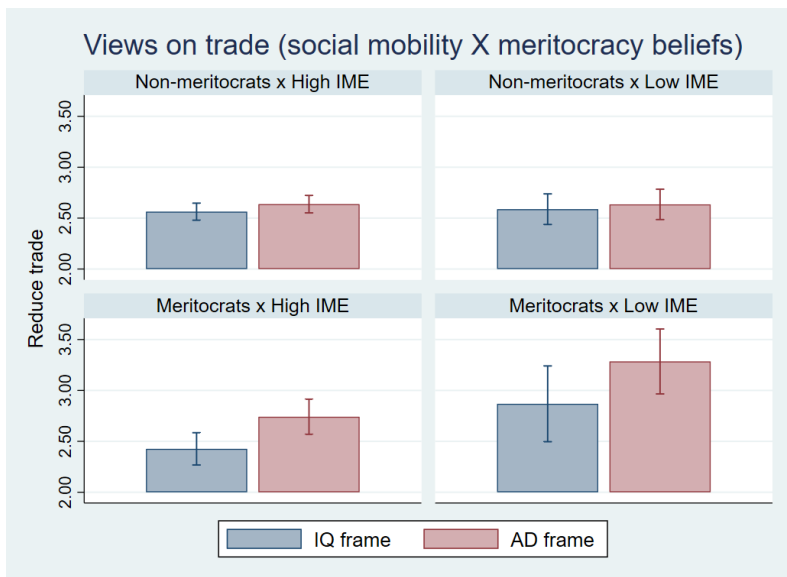


Figure 6: Trade preferences by social mobility and meritocracy beliefs. Note: “IME” = intergenerational mobility expectations.

shown convincingly that trade facilitates technological progress and automation, which, in turn, causes employment losses (particularly in middle-skill jobs) (Autor, Dorn and Hanson, 2015).³³ Do respondents accept that automation is responsible for unmet economic expectations, or is the blame uniquely placed on trade? Again, we predict that anxious meritocrats would not be especially susceptible to a narrative blaming automation (rather than trade) reflective of a lack of public consensus among political elites about the labor market effects of technology.

To explore this, we administered a survey experiment in which we primed our respondents on two different labor market shocks that could be potential drivers of the perceived weakening of the American Dream.³⁴ We designed a framing vignette in which respondents were randomly assigned to one of two treatment conditions, or a control condition. In our first condition, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “Some US foreign economic policies have moved our jobs overseas and left millions of hard-working Americans struggling to find good jobs, unable to provide for their families and live out the American Dream.” Respondents could select answers on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” In our second condition, respondents were instead asked whether they agreed or disagreed with

³³See Mansfield and Rudra (forthcoming) for a summary of research analyzing the links between trade and technological progress.

³⁴This survey was administered on a quota sample of respondents to the online Prolific survey panel; respondents were selected so as to match national distributions of partisan identity. Note that, due to the ongoing covid crisis, we suspended data collection earlier than intended.

a different statement: “Automation in the workforce has left millions of hard-working Americans struggling to find good jobs, unable to provide for their families and live out the American Dream.” The control group did not receive a prime.

The language in the two frames is almost identical in that we explicitly prime respondents to think about existing challenges to American mobility. Unlike the first frame which suggests that foreign economic policies are to blame, in the second we highlight the role of an impersonal technological force (automation). The experiment was designed to help us distinguish whether or not meritocrats respond to other (automation) policy cues ascribed to limiting their attainment of the American Dream, or whether blaming foreign economic actors per se for their anxiety was what motivated protectionism.

We first report our unconditional treatment effects. As reported in Figure 7, among all survey respondents, we do find that priming individuals to think about the role of “foreign economic policies” significantly increased the likelihood respondents reported wishing to restrict trade,³⁵ providing further causal support for (H1) on a different sample than the previous survey experiment and somewhat modified experimental design. Note, however, that priming respondents to (ostensibly) blame automation for declining social mobility had no significant effect on trade preferences, suggesting that individuals do not prefer trade protectionism in response to a different – albeit related – labor market threat: automation.³⁶

Were meritocrats distinguishable in their response to these differing primes? To assess the uniqueness of this group, we again used a question on their views of the causes of poverty. Although standard in the literature, asking whether respondents view the “poor as lazy” might lead to a “pro-trait” conservative bias, whereas we know that individuals across the ideological spectrum ascribe to this national ethos, albeit to different degrees. In order to prevent potential biases that might arise from respondents more likely to agree with any statement, we included both this “pro-trait” and a second “con-trait” question still intended to capture overall views on the role of merit in the US market. To do so, we first asked respondents our standard question about whether or not poverty reflected an absence of hard work.

We also asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: “Hard work

³⁵Wording for this trade preferences question was identical to that described above.

³⁶We also do not find that respondents exposed to the automation frame had significantly increased demands for restrictions on automation.

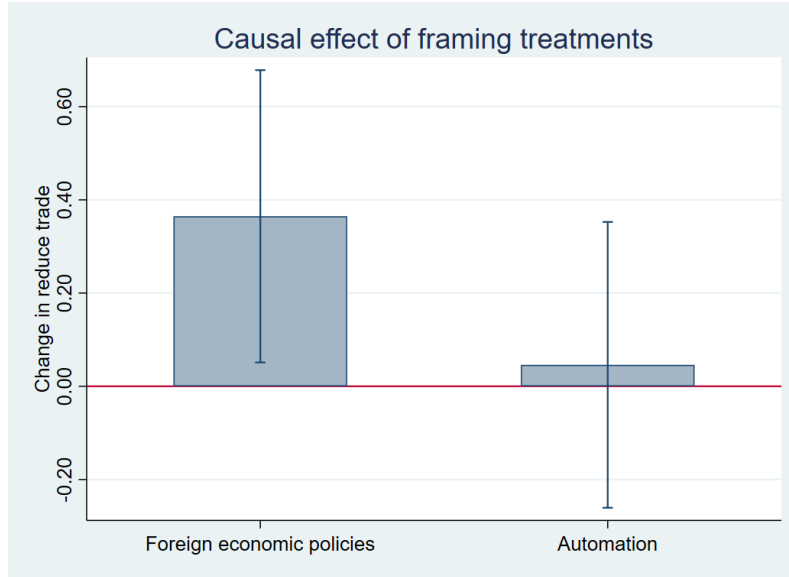


Figure 7: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of foreign economic policies or automation experimental framing.

doesn't usually bring success; its more a matter of luck and connections." Respondents were asked to select a value between 0 and 100 reflecting their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement. In what follows, we require respondents to score above the median value of agreement with the first question and below the median level of agreement with the second question to be identified as "meritocrats;" all told, almost exactly a third of our respondents are therefore qualified as "meritocrats" according to this coding scheme.³⁷ In support of the idea that such views enjoy support across the ideological spectrum, using this measurement strategy we find over one-third of respondents (37%) who identify as Democrats are characterized as "meritocrats," along with half (50%) of Independents and two-thirds (67%) of Republicans.

The conditional treatment effects by individual views on meritocracy support our predictions.³⁸ As can be seen in Figure 8, in strong support of H2, the only group for which we observe an effect on trade preferences of the "foreign economic policies" framing is among our respondents with strong faith in the link between effort and success. Finally, Figure 9 represents the central claim of this paper that the anti-foreign trade framing should resonate amongst meritocrats with concerns about falling social mobility (H3). After conditioning our treatment effect on concerns about children's financial future, it is only among meritocrats who do not believe their children will do better that

³⁷We report in the Appendix that our primary findings are unchanged using several alternative operationalizations.

³⁸As meritocracy views are not randomly assigned to respondents, we additionally control in these specifications for measures of age, gender, education, income, race, and partisanship.

we find a positive and statistically significant treatment effect.³⁹ All told, we find strong support for our central claims that individuals with a dedicated belief in the ideal of American meritocracy—particularly those facing economic anxiety themselves—are most likely to prefer trade restrictions when primed to link declining mobility in the US to foreign actors.

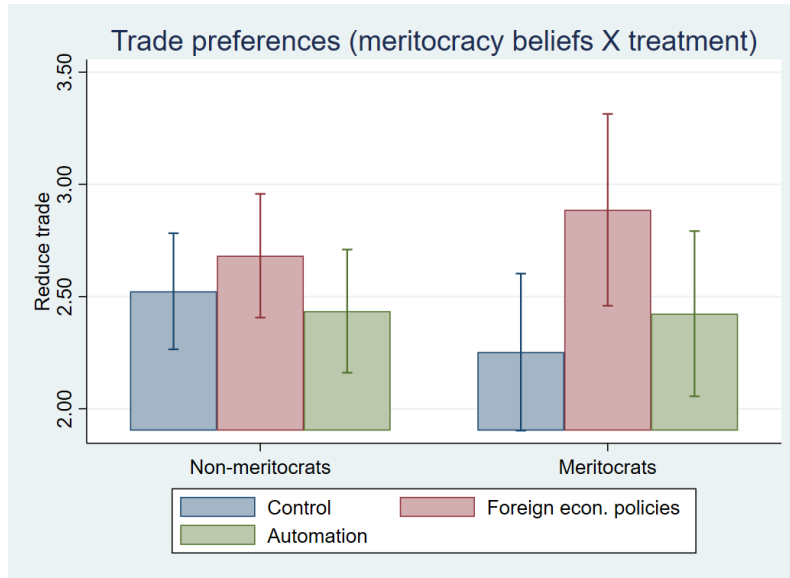


Figure 8: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of experimental framing, by meritocracy beliefs.

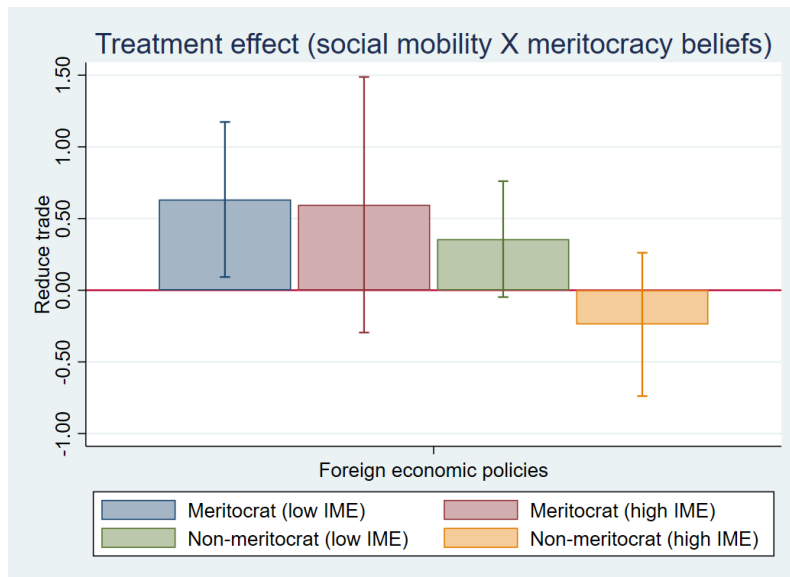


Figure 9: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of foreign economic policies framing, by strict meritocracy measure and social mobility. Note: “IME” = intergenerational mobility expectations.

³⁹In the Appendix, we report similar results for two other pre-specified sources of economic anxiety: housing costs and labor market concerns.

Parenthetically, we ran a third experiment (via Prolific) to assess whether additional alternative sources of threat to the American Dream might drive respondents to either seek trade protection, or potentially increase support for other (related) policy options. More precisely, our interest was in discovering whether or not linking corporate wealth or immigration to the fading American Dream would have an impact on support for the corporate income tax or restrictions on immigration, respectively. Not only were these frames unrelated to respondent preferences over trade protection, we also find no evidence that these frames impacted support for taxes on corporations or stricter immigration policies.⁴⁰ These findings again suggest that only globalization-related issues that have elite consensus (i.e., trade causes job losses that adversely impact the American Dream) drives public sentiment.

3.4 US nationalism

Recent work by Mutz (2018) emphasizes the importance of US nationalist identity as a driver of opposition to free trade; in particular, Mutz argues that concerns about declining American dominance internationally creates concerns about falling US superiority among respondents with strong attachment to their national identity.⁴¹ To the extent that views on meritocracy are correlated with feelings of US superiority, one may be concerned that our demonstrated association between meritocrats and anti-trade sentiment may simply be capturing the effect of variables like nationalist sentiment previously identified by other scholars. To assess this possibility, as part of our second experiment we additionally collected information on respondent views on US nationalism by replicating the same questions reported in Mutz (2018); more precisely, we asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following three statements: “In the United States, our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others;” “I would rather be a citizen of America than of any other country in the world;” and, “The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Americans.” Respondents could select from five possible values ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree;” as in Mutz (2018), we take the arithmetic mean of responses to the three questions as capturing views on US NATIONALISM.

While concerns that views on US meritocracy and nationalism may be coterminous are plausible

⁴⁰Results presented in Appendix A.

⁴¹See also discussion of the association between nationalism and anti-global sentiment in Mansfield and Mutz (2009).

theoretically, we first note that the data suggest a positive but rather weak association between the two concepts; our meritocracy beliefs measure correlates at about 0.24 with the US national superiority score. In addition, as reported in Appendix Figure 10, after controlling for nationalist sentiment directly we continue to find a robust positive effect of our American Dream frame on the trade views of meritocrats, suggesting that our primary findings are not simply suffering from the omission of a control for nationalist sentiment.⁴²

3.5 White identity

Finally, we address one more alternative explanation for our results: race. For instance, Jardina (2019) documents lower trade preferences among white respondents who identify strongly with their ethnicity, arguing that these “white identifiers” perceive the loss of manufacturing jobs from trade competition to be particularly concentrated among white workers.⁴³ What if our measure of “meritocracy” is simply a proxy for white racial identity, such that our findings of sensitivity to framing about trade’s effects on the American Dream are nothing more than the consequences of anxiety about the declining place of whites in American society?

To begin, we note that we always control for race in our results above, alleviating concerns that our findings might be a simple artefact of racial identity. However, to take this concern more seriously, we also included in our second survey experiment questions derived directly from Jardina’s work on the importance of white racial identity as a distinct recent political phenomenon. After asking respondents about the race with which they identified, we also asked respondents to tell us how important being of the race they identified was to them, with options ranging from “not important” to “very important” on a 5-point Likert scale. Following Jardina (2019), we categorize white respondents as WHITE IDENTIFIERS if they reported being white as “somewhat” or “very” important to them.

Meritocracy beliefs appear to be quite distinct from notions of white identity; our measure of meritocrats correlates at about 0.17 with Jardina’s white identifier measure. Finally, as above, we report in Appendix Figure 12 results after controlling directly for white identity, where we

⁴²In addition, as reported in Appendix Figure 11, when we condition our treatment effect on meritocracy views, we actually find that, if anything, the AD frame increases opposition to trade among the least nationalist respondents, which is the opposite of what we would expect if meritocracy beliefs and nationalist superiority beliefs were identical.

⁴³See also Guisinger (2017) for a similar account.

continue to find strongly significant evidence that individual views on fair market-based rewards for individual effort moderate the consequences of the American Dream frame on preferences over restricting trade. Thus, without disputing the potential importance of additional sources of identity as drivers of views on trade, we argue that our emphasis on views on meritocracy captures an important but previously ignored crucial source of variation in views on global integration.

4 Reflections

We began with a simple hypothesis: disappointment in an individual's prospective life chances influences political attitudes far more broadly than previous research has anticipated. To test this hypothesis, we looked at anticipated inter-generational mobility; the goal was to assess whether or not unmet expectations for economic success influenced political attitudes. The arena in which we looked for effects were individual attitudes on trade, a policy area often cited as a cause for job losses and growing income inequality. Our empirical strategy was to first, examine the degree to which an individual believed in the central American ethos that hard work was the road to success and second, to measure whether or not having such an attitude made a person more open to an anti-global perspective. Using both longitudinal and experimental data, we found that the interaction of a strong belief in the core principles of the 'American Dream', married to individuals' declining expectations of mobility was a good predictor of trade attitudes. Those who believed that hard work should lead to success but had become disappointed about their prospects for upward mobility were the group most open to seeing trade as responsible for hard times. These findings shed light on both the empirical literature on trade policy attitudes and the theoretical debate on how attitudes should be studied.

First, our empirical results suggest that core American beliefs may be fueling current disenchantment with trade policy. From Horatio Alger to tales of immigrant success, the American story has always included a rags to riches tale. For generations, the myth that anyone who was willing to work hard could achieve a better life than their parents proved true. But this changed with the internationalization of the US economy. Not all Americans were equally able to compete in the world economy and the distribution of benefits increasingly skewed to those with particular skills. By the end of the 20th century, inter-generational mobility had declined, creating growing

disconnect for those who believed strongly in this American myth.

More generally, we found that this national myth, married to growing inequality, was an important source of the backlash against globalism. Internationalization of markets brought winners and losers, and the negative labor market effects exacerbated mobility concerns of many across the country. The result was a disconnect between economic prospects and reality, and this created the bedrock upon which populism could thrive. Seeking some panacea for hard economic times and what often accompanies income loss—declining status—individuals were drawn to elites who provided both easy explanation and remedy, even if neither were defensible on empirical grounds.

Second, our analysis offers a slight rethinking of the variables that predict economic policy attitudes. Researchers shouldn't assume that individual attitudes are either a simple reflection of current economic interests or merely a function of sociotropic factors. It appears that individuals react to both; our analysis suggests, for instance, that the public's policy positions are affected by self-interested mobility prospects alongside sociotropic concerns about American job losses and the fading American Dream. But even accounting for both as a source of preferences, we could not fully explain the variation in trade attitudes over time. A broad understanding of public concerns explains only the potential receptivity to policy proposals, this is only the 'demand' side; we must still account for the exposition of policy solutions by elites, or the 'supply' side. Thus to explain public attitudes, we must also consider the range of elite messaging of policy ideas that are available for public consumption.

In our case, the reasons for declining social mobility are many and elite cues are necessary to help individuals interpret the effects of changes in the American economy. Some explanations are more adaptable and appealing than others. Automation or corporate-driven inequality could have been the villain, but technology is a problematic foe, and the left and right disagree on the extent to which inequality is a challenge; blaming foreign nations and bad trade policy is a better fit. Looking at contemporary arguments against free trade, we see a common anti-global position even though elites may advocate the policy for different reasons. So for example, the left sees competition from nations as creating downward pressure on wages while the right opines that the United States had become too dependent on foreign production. People in both parties can agree, however, that trade is causing a disruption in labor markets. The appeal of Trump's anti-globalism suggests that protectionism is a seductive, although rather simple, response to a complicated set

of market forces. In short, it appears that people may have inherent interests, but they have latent attitudes on particular policy options. Elites mobilize these attitudes.

In our experimental data, we looked more closely at how elite prompts shift attitudes. We observed that the American public associates trade—and not other foreign and domestic economic policies such as ones encouraging immigration, inequality, or automation—with challenges to greater inter-generational mobility. Our results confirm that elite rhetoric on trade’s distributional effects is an important part of the explanation for the rise of anti-global attitudes. While debate has raged on the fundamental interests and preferences on trade, far less attention has been paid to the question of what are the policy options offered to the public by elites and how individuals match a policy option with their own situation. Markets are difficult to understand and cause-effect relationships are probabilistic, at best. Our analysis emphasizes that elite consensus on trade’s distributional effects combined with unmet mobility expectations resulted in anti-globalization sentiment. Arguing that scholars need to look at elite consensus is not new; in the 1960s, Stokes called these types of issues “valence issues”. We suggest that anti-globalism and in particular, anti-trade, has taken on many of the characteristics of such an issue.

Our most general conclusion is that in the US and elsewhere, globalization has been a double-edged sword. With great wealth has come increased inequality, among individuals and across communities. Anxiety about these changes increases nostalgia for the past; the demand for future security opens the door for political entrepreneurs to provide easy answers to complex problems, often blaming outsiders, of a different race, of a different class or most often, from a foreign nation. Both individual and larger community factors play a role in how elite cues are interpreted and adopted. The anti-trade position resonates, not only because of the underlying changes in the interests of some Americans but also because it offers a simple explanation for the causes of economic hard times, and then an accompanying simple remedy of closing off the US market.

Future research would benefit by delving deeper into issue areas raised by this study. First, how generalizable are our findings? This study focused on the US where meritocracy, or the American Dream, has long been central to the national ethos. Yet the belief in hard work and meritocracy are not unique to America. Global surveys indicate that in most countries—rich and poor alike—over 60 percent of the population fall into the category of ‘meritocrats’ (WVS 2020). Second, given that there exists variability in appeal across elite cues, we need to pay closer attention to the political

marketplace of policy ideas and ask why and how policies become salient. Why do some policy ideas become uncontested amongst elites while others remain partisan? And what is the effect of an issue becoming a 'valence' issue and why are some policies more 'sticky' than other? Finally, scholars need to ask questions about the broader political causes and consequences of prospective economic mobility. Globalization has changed the labor market and expectations about the future in unexpected ways. Expectations, and not just underlying economic factors, need to be considered when modeling public opinion.

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A Regression output

A.1 Panel findings

VARIABLES	(1) Trade pref.	(2) Trade pref.
Meritocrats	0.293*** (0.105)	0.106 (0.150)
2008	0.169 (0.107)	0.018 (0.179)
2009	0.243*** (0.073)	0.113 (0.129)
2010	0.250*** (0.063)	0.153 (0.099)
2011	0.277*** (0.067)	0.318*** (0.107)
2012	0.355*** (0.065)	0.369*** (0.103)
2016	0.243*** (0.065)	0.186** (0.087)
Meritocrat x 2008	-0.279 (0.194)	-0.271 (0.318)
Meritocrat x 2009	-0.340*** (0.130)	-0.074 (0.235)
Meritocrat x 2010	-0.195 (0.121)	0.163 (0.188)
Meritocrat x 2011	-0.195 (0.126)	0.129 (0.204)
Meritocrat x 2012	-0.144 (0.121)	0.068 (0.193)
Meritocrat x 2016	-0.441*** (0.117)	-0.233 (0.165)
High IME		0.190* (0.108)
Meritocrat x High IME		0.281 (0.201)
Female	-0.308*** (0.047)	-0.314*** (0.051)
Age	-0.026** (0.011)	-0.019 (0.013)
Age ²	0.000** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Income \$30-50k	0.019 (0.057)	0.025 (0.065)
Income \$50-75k	0.155** (0.068)	0.133* (0.079)
Income \$75-150	0.250*** (0.065)	0.259*** (0.071)
Income >\$150k	0.412*** (0.097)	0.403*** (0.102)
Unemployed	-0.186 (0.128)	-0.162 (0.131)
White	-0.036 (0.057)	-0.054 (0.064)
Married	-0.004 (0.127)	0.031 (0.138)
Some college/2-yr degree	0.041 (0.062)	0.002 (0.069)
4-yr degree	0.209*** (0.070)	0.141* (0.077)
Post-grad	0.524*** (0.073)	0.514*** (0.078)
Independent	-0.181*** (0.060)	-0.180*** (0.068)
Republican	-0.034 (0.061)	-0.063 (0.067)
Other/Unsure	0.127 (0.092)	0.181* (0.097)
High IME x 2008		0.103 (0.270)
High IME x 2009		0.072 (0.205)
High IME x 2010		0.100 (0.152)
High IME x 2011		-0.086 (0.183)
High IME x 2012		-0.141 (0.159)
High IME x 2016		0.041 (0.126)
Merit. x High IME x 2008		0.256 (0.486)
Merit. x High IME x 2009		-0.344 (0.351)
Merit. x High IME x 2010		-0.397 (0.302)
Merit. x High IME x 2011		-0.355 (0.332)
Merit. x High IME x 2012		-0.178 (0.294)
Merit. x High IME x 2016		-0.252 (0.238)
Observations	4,298	3,090
R-squared	0.115	0.134

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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Table 2: Trade views over time.

VARIABLES	(1) Trade pref.
Meritocrats	-0.221* (0.113)
High IME	0.270** (0.105)
Meritocrat x High IME	0.161 (0.201)
Age	-0.050* (0.030)
Age ²	0.000 (0.000)
Female	0.118 (0.088)
Income \$30-50k	0.397*** (0.149)
Income \$50-75k	0.010 (0.169)
Income \$75-150	0.135 (0.139)
Income >\$150k	0.199 (0.177)
White	0.073 (0.117)
Some college/2-yr degree	-0.128 (0.124)
4-yr degree	-0.295** (0.137)
Post-grad	-0.009 (0.142)
Observations	720
R-squared	0.054

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3: Within-individual change in trade preferences.

A.2 Yougov experiment

VARIABLES	(1) Reduce trade	(2) Reduce trade
AD treatment	0.052 (0.053)	0.060 (0.060)
Meritocrats	-0.013 (0.086)	-0.094 (0.093)
AD treat. x Meritocrats	0.292** (0.121)	0.268** (0.135)
Low IME		0.028 (0.088)
AD treat. x Low IME		0.002 (0.121)
Meritocrat x Low IME		0.444** (0.222)
AD treat. x Merit. x Low IME		0.016 (0.301)
Age	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)
Female	0.188*** (0.050)	0.178*** (0.050)
Some college	-0.268*** (0.059)	-0.274*** (0.059)
College grad	-0.360*** (0.072)	-0.362*** (0.072)
Post-grad	-0.645*** (0.092)	-0.653*** (0.093)
White	0.228** (0.112)	0.229** (0.114)
Black	0.239* (0.129)	0.219* (0.130)
Hispanic	0.150 (0.129)	0.135 (0.130)
Has child	0.054 (0.064)	0.058 (0.065)
Married	0.119** (0.054)	0.119** (0.054)
Income \$50-100,000	-0.183*** (0.062)	-0.178*** (0.062)
Income >\$100,000	-0.202** (0.083)	-0.206** (0.082)
Religious importance	-0.071** (0.028)	-0.075*** (0.028)
Church attend.	-0.002 (0.019)	0.001 (0.019)
Observations	1,952	1,935
R-squared	0.090	0.098

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 4: AD vs IQ frame effect on trade preferences.

VARIABLES	(1) Reduce trade	(2) Reduce trade	(3) Reduce trade
FEP treatment	0.365** (0.159)	0.158 (0.192)	0.356 (0.245)
Automation treatment	0.046 (0.156)	-0.089 (0.191)	0.108 (0.237)
Meritocrats		-0.271 (0.222)	0.040 (0.266)
FEP x Meritocrats		0.475 (0.337)	0.277 (0.405)
Autom. x Meritocrats		0.260 (0.320)	0.253 (0.414)
High IME			0.533* (0.277)
FEP x High IME			-0.595 (0.384)
Autom. x High IME			-0.567 (0.404)
Meritocrats x High IME			-0.950** (0.476)
FEP x Merit. x High IME			0.558 (0.734)
Autom. x Merit. x High IME			0.447 (0.667)
Age		0.002 (0.006)	0.003 (0.006)
Female		0.451*** (0.133)	0.481*** (0.135)
Some college/2 year		-0.313 (0.208)	-0.345 (0.211)
4 year/Some grad		-0.052 (0.203)	-0.068 (0.204)
MA/PhD		-0.370 (0.255)	-0.399 (0.255)
HH income		0.029 (0.027)	0.027 (0.027)
White		0.181 (0.156)	0.184 (0.157)
Democrat		-0.382** (0.149)	-0.353** (0.150)
Republican		-0.066 (0.165)	-0.068 (0.167)
Observations	222	221	221
R-squared	0.027	0.148	0.181

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 5: Foreign economic policies (FEP) vs automation framing effect on trade preferences.

A.3 Prolific experiment

VARIABLES	(1) Reduce trade	(2) Reduce immig.	(3) Decrease corp. tax
Immigration treatment	0.030 (0.138)	0.202 (0.141)	0.215 (0.139)
Corporations treatment	0.026 (0.140)	0.142 (0.143)	-0.029 (0.140)
Age	-0.002 (0.005)	0.007 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)
Female	0.441*** (0.115)	0.128 (0.117)	-0.273** (0.115)
Some college/2 year	0.194 (0.188)	0.515*** (0.192)	-0.314* (0.188)
4 year/Some grad	0.036 (0.187)	0.226 (0.192)	-0.513*** (0.188)
MA/PhD	-0.248 (0.215)	-0.092 (0.219)	-0.411* (0.215)
HH income	-0.034 (0.023)	-0.038 (0.023)	-0.018 (0.023)
White	0.012 (0.125)	-0.174 (0.128)	0.022 (0.126)
Democrat	-0.226 (0.141)	-0.451*** (0.145)	-0.262* (0.142)
Republican	0.213 (0.148)	0.733*** (0.151)	0.721*** (0.148)
Observations	303	303	303
R-squared	0.107	0.248	0.202

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 6: Corporations frame vs immigration frame.

B Additional Findings

B.1 Trade views and presidential vote choice

A critical reader might ask – given work by Guisinger (2017) and others suggesting that trade policy is simply not an electorally-salient topic in the US – whether these changing views on trade matter? That is, while we have documented secular shifts in the American population’s views over global economic integration, is there any reason to suppose that this actually influenced the outcome of the 2016 election?⁴⁴ As reported in Table 7, we recover strongly significant evidence that individuals who became more negative in their views on trade were in fact much more likely to vote for Donald Trump for president; as reported in Column 2, this finding remains even after controlling for a host of alternative individual-level factors including education, gender, age, income, employment status, race, and partisanship.

⁴⁴Mutz (2018) also documents that respondent views on trade correlated strongly with presidential vote choice in 2016, but not in 2012.

VARIABLES	(1) Vote Trump	(2) Vote Trump
Δ Trade pref.	-0.048*** (0.012)	-0.030*** (0.011)
Some college/2-yr degree		-0.039 (0.037)
4-yr degree		-0.097** (0.040)
Post-grad		-0.151*** (0.042)
Female		-0.060** (0.026)
Age		0.002 (0.008)
Age ²		0.000 (0.000)
Income \$30-50k		0.039 (0.042)
Income \$50-75k		0.114** (0.049)
Income \$75-150		0.022 (0.038)
Income >\$150k		0.040 (0.050)
Unemployed		-0.015 (0.082)
White		0.110*** (0.034)
Married		-0.173* (0.103)
Independent		0.361*** (0.030)
Republican		0.781*** (0.031)
Observations	1,412	750
R-squared	0.012	0.543

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 7: Trade views and vote choice

B.2 Immigration/Corporation framing experiment

VARIABLES	(1) Reduce Trade	(2) Reduce Immig.	(3) Increase taxes
Immigration treatment	0.030 (0.138)	0.202 (0.141)	0.215 (0.139)
Corporation treatment	0.026 (0.140)	0.142 (0.143)	-0.029 (0.140)
Controls	✓	✓	✓
Observations	303	303	303
R-squared	0.107	0.248	0.202

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 8: Immigration and Corporation Framing Treatment effects

B.3 Alternative explanations

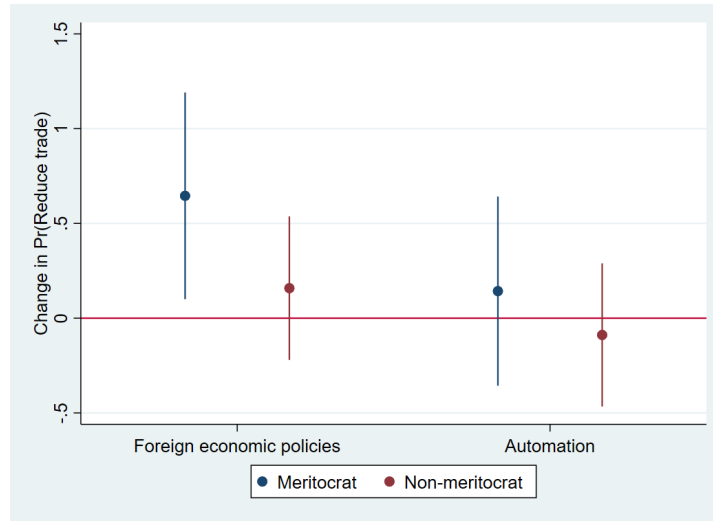


Figure 10: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of foreign economic policies framing, by meritocracy beliefs (controlling for US nationalism).

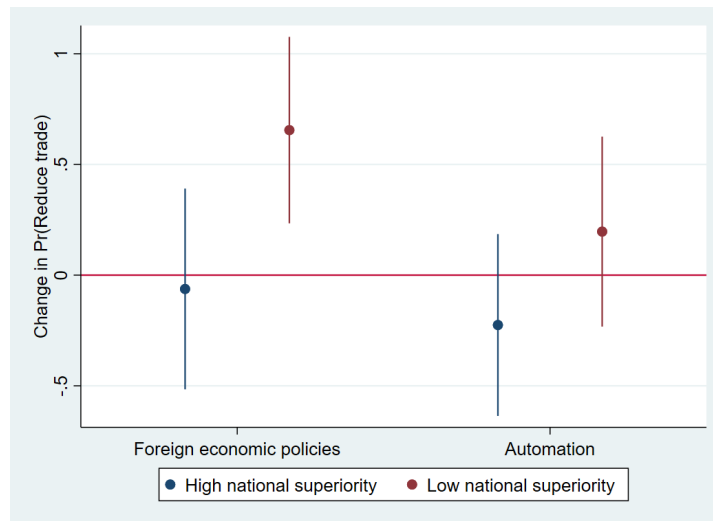


Figure 11: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of foreign economic policies framing, by US superiority beliefs.

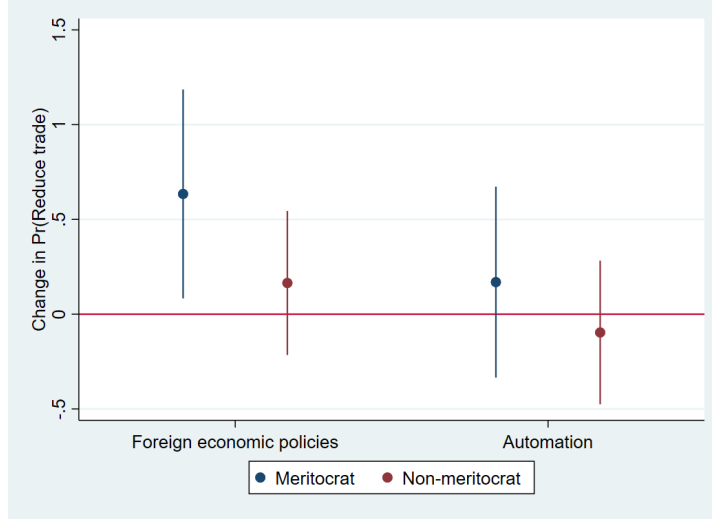


Figure 12: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of foreign economic policies framing, by meritocracy beliefs (controlling for white ID).

B.4 Pre-registered sources of economic anxiety

To assess heterogeneity of our foreign economic policy framing experiment, we demonstrate below the treatment effect among two additional pre-specified groups likely to be facing economic anxiety: those facing trouble in the housing market and those concerned about financial conditions more broadly.

First, we show that there is strong evidence that meritocrats with worries about housing costs were particularly susceptible to our foreign economic narrative: using either measure of meritocratic views, we find strong positive and statistically significant effects on preferences for limiting trade among meritocrats exposed to our foreign economic framing.⁴⁵

In order to capture broader sources of economic anxiety in addition to POUM, we asked survey respondents whether they felt stressed about any of nine potential sources of financial anxiety; these included concerns about keeping their job, technology in the workforce, saving for retirement, credit card debt, student debt, medical expenses, housing costs, caring for an aging parent, and general monthly expenses. Per our pre-analysis plan, we performed factor analysis on these nine variables, which generate three underlying factors with eigenvalues greater than one. Here, we focus in particular on the effects of our experimental framing among those who report anxiety about the labor market, as a strong probable source of anxiety about economic conditions in the

⁴⁵Note, in support of H1, we also find in this specification that non-meritocrats with economic anxiety were somewhat susceptible to this framing as well.

US. As shown in Figure 14, we find that meritocrats with higher anxiety about the labor market are indeed more likely to oppose trade after being exposed to the foreign economic policies frame; this contrasts with a consistent null effect on non-meritocrats, regardless of economic anxiety.

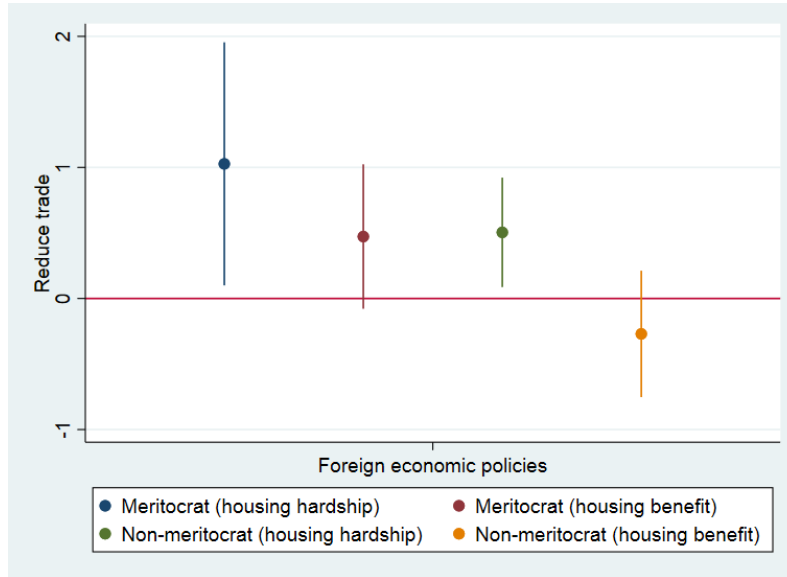


Figure 13: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of foreign economic policies framing, by strict meritocracy measure and housing hardship.

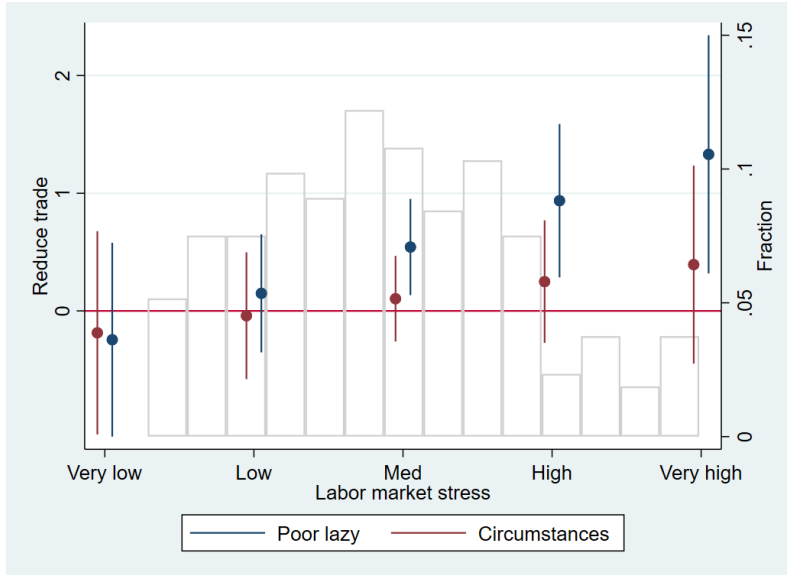


Figure 14: Effect on preferences for trade restriction of foreign economic policies framing, by meritocracy beliefs and labor market stress. Grey bars indicate empirical distribution of the labor market stress measure.

B.5 Placebo experiment

While we have demonstrated above that a meritocrat presented with a narrative blaming foreign economic policies for a decline in their relative economic status was significantly more likely to favor reduction in foreign trade, it might be the case that this group of individuals would respond in the same way to any source of threat to social mobility in the US. To assess the degree of power of a negative trade prompt, we fielded a follow-up survey in October 2020 on quota sample from Prolific that was representative of current US partisan identity.

Our design in this survey was largely identical to that above, save that we now presented respondents with two different narratives blaming different factors for declines in US standard of living. In the first frame, to assess the possibility that any international source of threat might similarly trigger opposition from meritocrats, respondents were presented with the following prompt: “Some policymakers argue that immigrants in the United States have left millions of hard-working Americans struggling to find good jobs, unable to provide for their families and live out the American Dream.” As above, respondents could express agreement or disagreement on a five point scale to this narrative blaming immigration.

While we are convinced that elite framing around external threats to upward mobility shaped

anti-trade sentiment among meritocrats, it is possible that we would see the same effect among non-meritocratic respondents with a slightly different prompt. Following on elements of the Bernie Sanders campaign, we focused on corporations and “the 1%” as the alternative villain to that of America’s trading partners. To assess this possibility, the second treatment condition exposed respondents to the following prompt: “Some policymakers argue that tax loopholes for the wealthy and corporations have increased inequality in our country and left millions of hard-working Americans struggling to find good jobs, unable to provide for their families and live out the American Dream.” As with each other treatment condition, respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a five point scale with this statement blaming economic elites for declining mobility in the US.

In striking contrast to the consistent results on trade preferences for those who received the narrative blaming foreign economic policies (particularly among respondents with strong beliefs in US meritocracy), we find no evidence that either the *immigration* or *economic elites* framing significantly affected respondents’ views over trade, either unconditionally or when interacted with views on meritocracy. Nor did these framings appear to affect support for more related issue areas: the immigration framing did not significantly affect respondent support for restricting immigration into the US, nor did the economic elite framing significantly influence individual support for increasing corporate income tax rates. We take these findings to indicate that there is indeed something special about the issue of trade as a scapegoat for falling social mobility in the US. Americans confronted by a set of economic factors that were dissonant with expectations, relied on policy makers providing explanations for hard economic times. Voters are confronted by a range of issues in their lives; the shifting conditions for employment, especially as the US becomes increasingly involved in international trade is hard to understand and thus rife with uncertainty. It is a perfect example of how particular political cues can interact with cultural myths and change views of the electorate.

C Descriptive results

Correlates of meritocratic views

VARIABLES	(1) Poor lazy	(2) Poor lazy
Female	-0.114*** (0.024)	-0.098*** (0.025)
Age	0.001 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.006)
Age ²	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
\$30-50k	0.091*** (0.026)	0.104*** (0.028)
\$50-75k	0.159*** (0.034)	0.201*** (0.036)
\$75-150k	0.139*** (0.030)	0.166*** (0.031)
>\$150k	0.178*** (0.047)	0.222*** (0.048)
Unemployed	-0.034 (0.052)	-0.017 (0.052)
White	0.089*** (0.026)	0.074*** (0.028)
Married	-0.110** (0.048)	-0.091* (0.054)
Some college/2-yr degree	-0.006 (0.033)	-0.002 (0.034)
4-yr degree	-0.040 (0.036)	-0.035 (0.038)
Post-grad	-0.120*** (0.037)	-0.105*** (0.040)
County unemp.		0.002 (0.007)
County average pay		-0.036*** (0.011)
% Manuf. employment		0.104 (0.207)
County rural pop.		-0.000 (0.001)
Observations	4,907	3,634
R-squared	0.055	0.064

Robust standard errors clustered by respondent in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 9: This table reports results of OLS regression of our measure of “meritocracy beliefs” on individual and regional covariates. Survey-year fixed effects are suppressed for presentation.