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Political Behavior, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Dec., 1998), 341-360.

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TRADE WINDS NAFTA and the Rational Public

Eric M. Uslaner

The sharp increase in support for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) poses a challenge to many of our conceptions of public opinion. Most large shifts in public opinion follow major events. Based on models estimated from the September to November NBC News/Wall Street Journal surveys, I show this was not the case with respect to public opinion on NAFTA. Instead, the increase in support for the pact reflected a slower response to a public debate over the merits of free trade versus protectionism. As the debate proceeded, large segments of the public—including the least interested—developed more highly constrained belief systems. By the end of the public discourse, the most and least interested citizens both linked attitudes on the merits of trade to their positions on NAFTA and to their evaluations of the elites on each side of the issue. People made up their minds on NAFTA on the basis of arguments about trade, not about their own self-interest. The NAFTA case suggests that there may be a “rational public” at the individual level after all, even among people who may not usually be interested in public affairs.

American public opinion moves slowly. Swift *aggregate* change is rare and almost always occurs in response to a major event (Page and Shapiro, 1992). There is a lot of individual-level change. But most of this movement represents either measurement error in survey or public attitudes that are not well formed (Converse, 1966). When people do change their minds systematically on a major policy area, they often take cues from elites. Yet only some people pay attention to what opinion leaders are saying and not all of them can be persuaded. The most highly attentive people largely have their minds made up; the least attentive people don't usually pay enough heed to get the message. People who pay a modicum of attention are the best target group for elite opinions: The messages will get through to them and their prior attitudes are not set in stone (Zaller, 1992).

Now imagine a policy debate in which there is a considerable turnaround in public attitudes in a short period of time. The previous minority position

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now becomes the majority position, as national opinion shifts more than 10% in two months (Page and Shapiro, 1992, consider a shift this size *over a year* to be significant). But this is not a simple case of an unstable electorate settling down: The balance of forces when the battle began looked very much as it had for a decade and a half. There was a “big event” that pundits claimed turned the tide toward the victorious side, but there is little evidence to support this view. Instead, it seems as if public opinion had turned around *before* the critical incident. And change occurred across all strata of the electorate, especially among the *least* attentive. People sorted themselves philosophically (if not ideologically), rather than on the basis of self-interest.

The issue was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which passed the Congress in November 1993. The accord with Mexico and Canada was originally negotiated by President George Bush. President Bill Clinton, originally a reluctant supporter, eventually took an active role in a public campaign to win congressional approval of the pact. Organized labor joined with former presidential candidate H. Ross Perot in a national campaign to keep public support for protectionism strong enough to defeat the treaty. As late as September, public opinion surveys showed NAFTA with barely more than 40% support among the public. Public attitudes on trade are not terribly malleable. From 1976 to September 1993, public backing for tariffs as opposed to free trade shifted across a very narrow range, from 53% to 57% (Schneider, 1992, p. 58).

The sharp increase in support for NAFTA poses a challenge to many of our conceptions of public opinion. Most big spurts follow major events. I shall show that the NAFTA surge did not. Instead, the increase in support for the pact seemed to reflect a slower response to a public debate over the merits of free trade versus protectionism. As the debate proceeded, large segments of the public—including the least interested—developed more highly constrained belief systems. By the end of the public discourse, the most and least interested citizens both linked attitudes on the merits of trade to their positions on NAFTA and to their evaluations of the elites on each side of the issue. People made up their minds on NAFTA on the basis of arguments about trade, not about their own self-interest. The NAFTA case suggests that there may be a “rational public” at the individual level after all, even among people who may not usually be interested in public affairs.

I shall estimate models from the September and November NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* surveys that will show the debate did *not* produce a shift in public opinion on NAFTA. These models focus on beliefs underlying trade accords (and control for favorability ratings for political leaders and some important demographic variables). They show that attitudes on key beliefs on trade became more favorable to NAFTA, more clearly linked to the arguments of both supporters and opponents of the pact, and (most critically) more important determinants of NAFTA attitudes by November. There was a

major event that many felt changed public opinion. With a week to go before the House vote, Vice President Al Gore challenged Perot to a televised debate that most pundits believed the vice president won handily (see below). Yet, the models I estimate below will show that the Gore–Perot debate was *not* the “big bang” that changed public attitudes on NAFTA.

Public attitudes began to move *before* the debate, according to an October (1993) survey by the same organizations. There were big shifts not only in favor of the pact but also on three of the four “trade beliefs”: would free trade increase prosperity, would the pact lead to more immigration from Mexico, and would jobs flee across the border. The exception was the belief that Japan and Europe would exploit the emerging Latin American market if NAFTA were defeated. (See the Appendix for the full question wordings and trends on the trade beliefs and NAFTA support, with and without don’t know responses). There were big increases in constraint. The beliefs and the pact became more intertwined from September to November. The trends in the beliefs from September to November, together with the increased constraint and the minimal effects of the debate, suggest an alternative account of attitude change on NAFTA. The public discourse appears to have convinced people that NAFTA would bring about economic growth even before the Gore–Perot debate. As these beliefs moved, so did support for the trade pact.

Without a panel survey, I can’t say precisely how support changed over time. Yet there is little evidence to support an alternative vision that the surge favoring NAFTA came just from the substantial share of the population (34%; see the Appendix) who were undecided in September. The undecided share remained the same in October and was still considerable in November (26%). Yet, few people were undecided about the trade beliefs and there is no trend in “no opinions” on these attitudes between September and November. So there is no support for an argument that Americans came to support NAFTA as they made up their minds on what the effects of trade really are.²

Change, when it occurs, usually is centered around the people with middling interest in the debate (Zaller, 1992). But this is not what happened on NAFTA, according to the models I estimate below. Some of the biggest increases in constraint came not from people with the *least* interest. By November, this group still had a majority opposed to NAFTA (by 56% to 44%), but it had moved farther than the middle or the top groups. The least educated showed levels of belief constraint that approached (and sometimes matched) those of people with graduate degrees. Only a campaign that captured the public’s attention would be likely to have such effects.

The pro-NAFTA forces sought to convince people that the trade pact would promote economic growth and that the Mexican border would not become a sieve for American jobs. They largely succeeded. By November, most Americans believed that NAFTA would help the economy. Even though there were two sides to the controversy that competed vigorously for public

attention, the pro-NAFTA forces had two key advantages. First, they spent their media advertising dollars more strategically (Kolbert, 1993). Second, their elites had greater credibility than the leaders opposing NAFTA. Every living former president endorsed the pact. On the other side was an even more diverse collection of public figures (Perot, Jesse Jackson, Pat Buchanan, Ralph Nader, and union leaders) who had far less clout—or electoral success. The highly concentrated campaign in the media and in the public realm more generally reached people who might otherwise tune out discourse over free trade.

The first step in the analysis is to develop a model of public attitudes on NAFTA. With identical survey questions at two points in time, I can then proceed to consider how attitudes changed (at least in the aggregate). I shall show that beliefs about free trade became more important determinants of NAFTA positions in November *and* there was greater issue constraint over time. People who claimed to have changed their views on the pact shifted toward ideological consistency, but not in response to the Gore–Perot debate. Constraint increased among the least interested as well as among people who were more engaged, suggesting that the national discourse was the most likely factor that turned around public opinion on the pact.

HOW ATTITUDES CHANGED

My data come from NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* polls of September and November 1993. The September survey had 1,006 respondents, the November poll had 803. Both surveys asked respondents whether they supported NAFTA and what impacts they expected the pact might have on jobs, economic growth, immigration, relations with Mexico, and the respondent's own job and company. The November survey also inquired whether people changed their minds, if they saw the nationally televised debate between Gore and Perot, and whether the pro-NAFTA stands of former presidents or the antipact positions of other leaders affected people's positions. I shall also refer to an October survey by the same organizations that I do not have access to, but have some marginals from the November coding sheets of Hart/Teeter Associates.

In September, 42% of Americans with opinions backed NAFTA (with 58% opposed). By November, there was an 11.8% shift—to a 53–47% pro-NAFTA majority. Opponents charged that lower wages in Mexico would drive American jobs south of the border (what Perot called the “giant sucking sound” of jobs emigrating), while Mexicans would continue to gain entrance (legally or not) to the higher-wage jobs across the border. Proponents of the pact held that free trade would promote economic growth in both countries (as well as Canada) through increased exports. And, they said, a booming Mexican economy would lead to *less* immigration to the United States. If the

U.S. did not move to integrate its economy with the big markets developing in Latin America, proponents argued, Japan and the European Economic Community (EEC) would assume economic leadership in America's own backyard.

Opponents of the pact stressed self-interest. NAFTA would cost jobs and lead to increased immigration. Supporters could only promise benefits in the future and a philosophical argument that free trade promotes economic growth. Yet, measures of self-interest failed to reach significance in multivariate models predicting public attitudes on NAFTA in September, whereas two of the four rationales for trade policy were powerful predictors.³ People worried less about how free trade would affect them personally than about what it would do to the larger economy (cf. Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979). This gave an opening to the pro-NAFTA forces. It should be easier to change trade beliefs if people are not preoccupied with their own fates.

In addition to the four trade beliefs, I also include favorability ratings of Perot, union households,⁴ and race in the models.⁵ People with positive views of the Texas billionaire or who belong to unions should be more likely to oppose the accord. African-Americans are less well off than most other Americans. Their economic insecurity should make them receptive to claims that trade accords hurt those at the bottom of the economic ladder.

I estimate the models using probit analysis, since the dependent variable (opposition to NAFTA) is a dichotomy. Since probit coefficients have no direct interpretation, I calculate probabilities for the minimum value of each independent variable and the maximum value for the variable, in each case letting the other predictors retain their actual values. The overall measure of impact is the difference in probabilities between the maximum and the minimum. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) call these differences "effects." The models do a good job of predicting respondents' answers: The September model gets 82.3% of the cases right; the November model succeeds 90.9% of the time, compared to null models predicting 54% and 58% percent of the cases.

NAFTA positions in September were largely shaped by expectations on job gains and immigration, Perot ratings, and race (Table 1). The effect for job losses was .593, by far the biggest in the model. The other trade beliefs had much smaller effects: .146 for immigration, and negligible impacts for jobs fleeing to Mexico and Japan and the EEC taking advantage of a NAFTA defeat. By November all four beliefs shaped attitudes toward NAFTA. The effect on jobs gained falls to $-.474$,⁶ but is still more than twice as great as any other predictor. More critically, people came to accept the argument that free trade promotes economic growth. In September, 44.7% held that NAFTA would promote job creation. By November, 56.3% did. There were also substantial rises in the effects for immigration (to .201, an almost 40% increase), for jobs fleeing to Mexico (to .157 from .007), and for worries that Japan and the EEC would exploit the Mexican market (to $-.091$ from $-.010$).⁷

TABLE 1. Models for September and November NBC News/Wall Street Journal Surveys: Probit Equations for Public Opposition to NAFTA

Independent Variable	September Coefficients	September Probabilities			November Coefficients	November Probabilities		
Constant	-1.847****				.437****			
Jobs gained	-1.787****	.849	.256	-.593	-1.987****	.740	.266	-.474
Japan/EEC take advantage	-.040	.592	.582	-.010	-.611***	.513	.422	-.091
Jobs flee to Mexico	.029	.581	.588	.007	.947****	.380	.536	.157
Immigration increase	.287***	.506	.652	.146	.683****	.353	.555	.201
Perot rating	.093**	.541	.632	.091	.291****	.396	.578	.183
Black	.527**	.572	.695	.124	-.089	.466	.454	-.012
Midatlantic	-.396**	.605	.506	-.099	.461**	.452	.514	.062
Union	-.070	.591	.557	-.034	.265**	.451	.524	.073

September: LLR = -207.55, $N = 478$, $R^2 = .520$, Percent predicted correctly: 82.3.

November: LLR = -102.61, $N = 419$, $R^2 = .780$, Percent predicted correctly: 90.9.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; **** $p < .0001$.

The Perot effect doubled to .183. The impact of union households more than doubled to .073 and is now significant at $p < .05$. While union members slightly increased their support for NAFTA between September and November (from 39.1% to 42.7%), nonunion household support swelled by almost 15%.⁸ People residing in the Middle Atlantic states in November were more likely than others to oppose NAFTA; in September they had been more supportive.

The two identical models in Table 1 provide a method for determining the relative aggregate effects of each trade belief in September and November. I insert the mean of jobs gained (1.556) in the September equation and derive an estimated probability of NAFTA support for that month; I repeat the process for November using that month's mean (1.426). I then subtract the November probability from the September likelihood for each belief. I report these differences (which take into account shifts in both coefficients and means) in Table 2.

Each of the four beliefs produces a net shift in support of between 12.1% and 14.6%—all in the pro-NAFTA direction. The biggest impacts are for jobs gained (14.6%) and immigration (13.4%). The other two beliefs and the Perot rating have slightly smaller effects. *Collectively the four beliefs produce a shift of 16.4% toward the pro-NAFTA side—more than the 11.8% shift on the pact itself.* Attitudes toward Perot had little effect beyond the four beliefs; the net change in probabilities of the four beliefs combined *plus Perot* was just .01% higher than the four arguments alone. Shifting attitudes toward NAFTA, at

TABLE 2. Probabilities of Opposing NAFTA by Beliefs in September and November Samples

Belief	September Probability	November Probability	Change in Probability
Jobs gained	.611	.465	-.146
Japan/EEC take advantage	.585	.463	-.122
Jobs flee to Mexico	.585	.464	-.121
Immigration increase	.588	.454	-.134
Four beliefs combined	.614	.450	-.164
Four beliefs combined + Perot rating	.616	.451	-.165

Probabilities are derived by inserting mean values for variables in the probit equations. Changes in probabilities are the November values minus the September values, with negative signs indicating movement toward supporting NAFTA.

least at the aggregate level, reflected changing beliefs about the positive and negative effects of free trade—and little else.

WHICH DISCOURSE MATTERED?

We can get more direct evidence about individual-level change from the November survey, which asked whether people changed their minds on NAFTA “in the past few weeks.” Of people with opinions, 17% said that they had changed their positions and 71% of the changers moved toward a more favorable position on NAFTA. If changing attitudes on the beliefs led to a shift in favor of NAFTA, what led people to accept the arguments that free trade brings growth and that the accord would not lead to more immigration?

The supposed turning point in the public battle was the November 9 debate between Gore and Perot a week before the House vote on NAFTA. The pundits (and the public) gave a big victory to Gore. *USA Today* and CNN attributed an overnight shift in public opinion of 23% to Gore’s performance, while an ABC News poll for *Nightline* suggested that the debate had harmed Perot’s stature and thus weakened opposition to the pact. An NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey confirmed that the 58–42 tilt against the accord in September became a 53–47 margin for the pact after the debate. Phil Duncan (1993) of *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* said that the debate “gave backers . . . a big psychological boost at a time when prospects for passage were dicey” (p. 3105).

The conventional wisdom was wrong. The November NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey asked whether respondents watched all of the debate, part of it, or just a little; or whether they heard or read about the debate afterward or not at all. *No matter how you carve up the attention to debate variable, it does not lead to an increase in support for NAFTA. People who*

TABLE 3. Determinants of Changing Attitudes on NAFTA: November 1993

Variable	Did Respondent Change?		Direction of Change	
	Coefficient	Effect	Coefficient	Effect
Constant	.135		-3.924	
No exposure	-.537**	-.106	.796*	-.052
Jobs gained	.510**	.113	3.201***	.402
Immigration rise	-.206**	-.095	-1.530**	-.252
Jobs flee Mexico	—	—	-2.362**	-.179
Perot rating	.039	.036	-.600**	-.196
Anti-NAFTA speakers	.183**	.144	—	—
LLR		-191.37		-10.00
N		460		72
R ²		.560		.927
Percent predicted: Probit		83.7		91.7
Null		83.7		68.1

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .0001$.

changed their mind on NAFTA were more likely than consistents to pay attention to the debate. Yet, exposure to the debate is weakly linked to shifting against the accord.

What drove people to change their minds? I estimated two probit equations. The first considered whether people changed their minds on NAFTA. The second examined the direction of change for those who shifted positions (Table 3). Seventy percent of the sample claimed to have seen or heard about the debate; 90% of changers had either first- or secondhand exposure. Respondents exposed to the debate were 11% more likely than those with no contact to change their minds. This impact is about the same as for each of the two beliefs that mattered (job gains and immigration rise). It was slightly smaller than the effect of arguments by anti-NAFTA leaders. Ratings of Perot did not induce people to change their minds.

While the debate may have induced people to alter their positions, exposure seems to have led this small sample of changers ($N = 72$) to have tilted *against* NAFTA. People who watched the debate and changed their minds were slightly more likely to move against the pact (by 5%). Trade beliefs were the dominant factors in changing attitudes on NAFTA. The effect for jobs gained is .402, for an immigration rise $-.252$, and for jobs fleeing to Mexico $-.179$.⁹ *People who agreed with all three pro-NAFTA arguments were almost certain ($p = .997$) to shift toward the treaty, while those who disagreed were bound to swing against it ($p = .001$).* Anti-NAFTA leaders may have induced people to change their minds, but they had no clear impact on the direction of the shifts.

Far more than exposure to the debate, consuming the message—especially of the linkage of trade and economic growth—changed people’s minds.

Why didn’t the debate matter more? On two of the three beliefs that affected changers’ positions, attitudes had begun to shift *before* November. In an October NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey with a smaller number of NAFTA items, support for the pact increased from 42% to 47% (see the Appendix for details). The share of respondents believing that more jobs would be created than lost rose from 45% to 49%, while the percentage who believed that American manufacturing jobs would move to Mexico dropped from 79% to 54%, where it ended up in November. There was a sharp drop in the share of Americans who believed that Japan and the EEC would take advantage of the Mexican market if NAFTA were defeated—from 59% in September to 46% in October, before partially rebounding (to 54%, for a net loss of 5%) in November. Even Perot’s favorability began its slide before the debate. In September, his positive-negative balance was about even; by October, his negatives were 12% higher than positives—a gap that grew to 19% by mid-November.¹⁰

The public found one side more credible than the other—and gradually changed the majority position. Once opinion begins to shift in one direction, momentum builds toward the favored side (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Between September and November, there was a 10% increase (from 45% to 55%) in the share of Americans who believed that the accord would bring about economic growth. There was a 7% decrease (from 35% to 28%) in the belief that immigration would increase and a 25% decline (from 79% to 54%) in the share of Americans who worried that jobs would flee to Mexico. These beliefs played a key role in shifting the public toward support for the treaty.

My causal argument goes from beliefs on trade and key leaders to positions on NAFTA. Yet, the survey is not a panel, so it is possible that “shifTERS” changed their NAFTA stands first and then rationalized their beliefs on trade. There is no way to establish causality with any certainty. Yet, there is one test that might help us sort out which came first. If trade beliefs shifted first, recent converts should display less belief constraint than people who had consistent positions on NAFTA. And this is what I find (data not shown). For two of the four beliefs (immigration and whether Japan and the EEC will take advantage of the market) and for all four cue-givers, switchers have less constrained views than do people who did not change their positions on NAFTA.

HOW VIEWS CHANGED

Politicians seeking to change public views wonder what the pro-NAFTA forces did to turn the tide around. People don’t change their views willy-nilly. What happened?

An ideal solution to this question would be to replace the probit estimates above with two-stage estimations, treating the four beliefs as endogenous. The difficulty with this approach is that it is tough to get good instruments for the four beliefs—especially ones that are included in both surveys. I estimated both ordered probits and regressions (with virtually no difference) for each belief in both September and November.¹¹ The adjusted R^2 ranges from .007 to .126, with an average of .060. These are not strong foundations on which to build simultaneous-equation estimation.

But this hardly means that opinion change was unstructured. By setting our methodological goals a bit more modestly—examining correlations—we can see a clear pattern (see Table 4). The messengers and the messages became more entwined with each other from September to November. The correlations between each belief and Clinton evaluations rose over the two months. So did the correlations between each belief and Perot evaluations.¹² The average absolute value of the Clinton belief linkage rose from .059 in September to .185 in November. For Perot, the linkage increased from .048 to .227. Clinton's increasing popularity seemed to drive people toward support for NAFTA, as did Perot's rising unpopularity.

In September, people were still hazy about what the stakes were and who stood where. By November, the President had become slightly more popular: His rating "rose" from 2.833 to 2.674 on the 5-point NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* scale ($p < .008$). Perot's popularity fell from 3.015 to 3.369 ($p < .0001$), dragging opposition to the anti-NAFTA position down with him. Perot had been conducting anti-NAFTA rallies throughout the country in the summer and fall. By the time of the debate, he had already inflicted much of the damage on his cause—just as the president had built up backing for his position.

Yet, it was not all Clinton and Perot. The November survey asked respondents what effects anti-NAFTA speakers such as Perot, Pat Buchanan, House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt (D, MO), former California Governor Jerry Brown, consumer advocate Ralph Nader, and "most leaders of labor unions" had on their backing for the accord. It also inquired what impact the support of all living presidents together with General Colin Powell and Lee Iacocca

TABLE 4. Correlations Among Belief Positions and Leader Evaluations

	Jobs Gained	Jobs Flee	Immigration	Japan Take Advantage
Clinton September	.125	-.079	-.020	-.011
Clinton November	.236	-.209	-.083	.211
Perot September	-.101	.029	.054	.008
Perot November	-.313	.218	.157	-.218
Presidents Pro	.393	-.298	-.154	.341
Anti-Speakers Con	-.152	.081	.082	-.031

had. The pro-NAFTA leaders joined the campaign of television commercials for the "yes" side.

The former presidents appear to have had a greater impact on the trade beliefs than the anti-NAFTA speakers. The average absolute correlation between how influential former presidents are and the four beliefs is .297. The average absolute correlation for anti-NAFTA leaders such as Perot and belief positions is just .087 (cf. Table 4). Seventeen percent of respondents said that the support of former presidents made them *much* more likely to back the accord, while just 10% said that the opposition of Perot and others made them much more likely to go against the pact. Sixty-three percent said that anti-NAFTA speaker positions would have no effect on their positions, while just 42% made the same statement about the pro-NAFTA elites.

By November, the public had not only moved toward support of NAFTA. It accepted the same arguments that most elites did: Free trade promotes economic growth. The public also saw clear links between the credibility of the messengers with the persuasiveness of the message. Clinton benefitted from his own popularity and Perot's sinking ratings. But the correlations with the living presidents are at least as impressive as those for Perot and Clinton. Clinton's claim that the former executives from both parties backed the accord helped create a vision of elite consensus. By November, Perot and the unions appeared isolated against an almost united elite.

Mondak (1993) showed that a popular leader (Ronald Reagan) could transfer his own high standing to policies he advocated. Mondak maintained that only leaders with considerable popularity could link their own esteem to support for policies. And presidential popularity only affects policies that receive little media attention. I find confirmation of part of Mondak's argument, but also several key qualifications. Clinton appeared to shape public opinion even though his popularity did not approach Reagan's levels of near 60%. His popularity, transformed from a 5-point scale, rose from 43% in September to 47% in November. And executive influence did not work in a media vacuum.¹³ Quite the contrary, the president was the chief cheerleader in the advertising blitz. Attitudes toward Perot were more important in shaping views on NAFTA in November, when Perot's transformed popularity was 33%, than in September, when he had 40% approval.

It is too simple to argue that the shifts in approval for Clinton and Perot led the public to shift its views on NAFTA. First, the magnitude of changes in popularity for the two leaders was not large. It would require a great leap of faith to link these changes to much bigger shifts on NAFTA and beliefs on trade. Second, in neither the September nor the November estimations were there powerful effects for either Clinton's or Perot's popularity. Clinton, Perot, and the pro- and anti-NAFTA figures were important because they increasingly served as cues that people used to sort out their positions on the trade pact. By November, people seemed able to sort out who was on what side and where they stood.

MOBILIZING WHOM?

How does public opinion change? Which parts of the public are most likely to shift their views? Zaller (1992) offers a compelling account. Divide the public into three parts, according to their level of interest in politics. You cannot change attitudes easily among the most interested. They pay a lot of attention to politics and are well informed. They have high levels of belief constraint. While the very interested are likely to pay a lot of attention to the public debate, their strongly held and anchored views make them poor targets for attitude conversion. At the other extreme, people who are not interested in politics are not likely to pay much attention to the public debate. Their views are not highly constrained—and, hence, their positions might well be malleable. They are more likely to have no position at all on a belief.¹⁴ But if they do not pay much heed to the national discourse, they are not likely to create the emerging majority for a policy. The best target for a leader attempting to shape positions is people with moderate levels of interest. They will pay some attention to the national debate and they are likely to have views that are less well formed than the most interested. These are the best targets for a campaign to change the balance of forces.

Yet, this is *not* what happened on NAFTA. As I show in Table 5, there were increases in constraint from September to November on all four beliefs (though to varying degrees) *among all groups in the population*. In many cases, the least involved showed the greatest gain in constraint. Following Zaller, I use level of education as the surrogate for interest in politics; the trichotomy available in the NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* surveys is: people without a college education (about 41% of each sample), people who attended college (about 46% of each sample), and people who have some graduate education (about 12% of each sample).

I consider five different measures of constraint. First is the probit effect for each argument about NAFTA from models identical to those in Table 1. I could not estimate a model in November for people with some graduate school: The level of constraint with most of the trade beliefs was so high that the model did not converge. Second, I report the gamma correlations between respondents' positions on NAFTA and their attitudes on the trade beliefs. Third, I present the simple proportion of each group agreeing with the pro-NAFTA argument. Fourth, I show the proportion of pact supporters who agree with the pro-NAFTA arguments. And finally, I show the average constraint (gamma) for each belief with the other three arguments.¹⁵

If the public discourse mattered, each of these measures should increase from September to November. Yet there is a catch. To the extent that constraint increases, some probit effects will decrease. As we have already seen, the belief of jobs gained dominated the early debate. Other arguments be-

TABLE 5. The Bases of NAFTA Support by Education Levels

	September			November		
	Noncollege	College	Graduate	Noncollege	College	Graduate
<i>Jobs Gained</i>						
Probit effects	-.400	-.702	-.739	-.486	-.389	—
Gamma w/ NAFTA	-.761	-.712	-.789	-.959	-.955	-.996
Proportion agreeing	.438	.433	.543	.507	.537	.689
Proportion NAFTA backers agreeing	.528	.854	.936	.786	.871	.964
Average belief gamma	-.113	-.213	-.251	-.400	-.431	-.466
<i>Jobs Won't Flee to Mexico</i>						
Probit effects	.021	.031	-.085	.127	.235	—
Gamma w/ NAFTA	.438	.647	.789	.773	.918	.956
Proportion agreeing*	.243	.181	.222	.465	.463	.452
Proportion NAFTA backers agreeing*	.458	.741	.895	.678	.901	.972
Average belief gamma	.214	.383	.508	.547	.582	.763
<i>Immigration Go Up</i>						
Probit effects	.107	.073	.027	.156	.216	—
Gamma w/ NAFTA	.228	.468	.711	.598	.613	.589
Proportion agreeing*	.118	.207	.318	.163	.202	.257
Proportion NAFTA backers agreeing*	.375	.710	.862	.677	.792	.875
Average belief gamma	-.103	.150	.366	.240	.208	.333
<i>Japan/EEC Take Advantage</i>						
Probit effects	-.072	.054	-.051	-.028	-.095	—
Gamma w/ NAFTA	-.141	-.050	-.306	-.691	-.686	-.901
Proportion agreeing*	.645	.537	.596	.537	.546	.538
Proportion NAFTA backers agreeing*	.636	.544	.638	.736	.715	.745
Average belief gamma	.146	.050	.002	-.429	-.409	-.482

*Proportion taking pro-NAFTA position.

Note: Immigration is a trichotomy.

came more important in November as the overall level of belief constraint increased. So the effects coefficients for jobs gained will necessarily *decrease* as other beliefs become important. For the other measures, there should be a shift toward pro-NAFTA sentiments and greater constraint.

This is precisely what happens. The probit effects go down for jobs gained, but increase for whether jobs will flee to Mexico and whether immigration will go up for both the noncollege and college cohorts. The picture is clearer for the gammas with NAFTA attitudes. For jobs gained, the gammas were uniformly high (greater than .7) for all three groups in September. By No-

vember, they were extremely strong (almost 1.00), even as the probit effects were decreasing. On the other three beliefs, there are more impressive gains in the gammas. Every group displayed remarkable constraint between NAFTA positions and each of the trade beliefs by November. And the greatest gains came not from the middle group but from the least involved. The average gamma almost doubled from September to November (from .392 to .755) for the least interested, compared to an increase of 1.7 times for the middle group (from .469 to .793) and a more modest rise of 1.3 times for the most involved (from .649 to .861).

Part of the reason for the increase in constraint comes from shifts in public opinion. For three of the four arguments, the public became more favorable to pro-NAFTA arguments. The biggest gain came on whether jobs would flee to Mexico, but all four arguments tilted toward the pro-agreement side.¹⁶ More critically, there was a sharp increase in support for the trade beliefs among people who backed the agreement—especially among people without a college education. In September, only 53% of NAFTA supporters accepted the argument that the free trade pact would increase economic growth; by November, almost 80% of pact supporters accepted this claim. In September, the uninvolved stood alone in their lack of constraint. By November, they looked much like their more highly educated counterparts. They were always less constrained than either of the other groups, but the differences became much smaller. In September, the least involved were 26.4% less likely to base their NAFTA positions on trade beliefs than were the middle group. By November, this gap had fallen to just 13.5%.¹⁷

The pattern is much the same for constraint *across the four trade arguments*. There were only modest linkages across the beliefs in September, as the average gammas reveal. For the least involved, two of the four arguments had negative *average* correlations with other beliefs. For people without college educations, attitudes on immigration and Japan and the EEC taking advantage had minimal connections to the two job items in September. And the gammas suggested a linkage in the wrong direction! The average belief constraint for the least involved was just .020 in September. For the other groups, the constraint was higher (.174 for the college educated and .281 for people with a graduate education) but still modest. By November, all three groups had more positive and powerful levels of constraint. And all three groups had roughly similar average gammas (.404 for the least educated, .407 for the middle group, and .511 for the most educated).

People with less education showed big gains in linking the messages with the messenger (see Table 6). In September, the least involved did not connect their attitudes toward Perot with their positions on NAFTA. The other two groups showed moderate relationships between their evaluations of the Texas billionaire and the free trade pact. Clinton evaluations were weakly linked with NAFTA positions for all groups. By November, there were strong con-

TABLE 6. Gammas Between NAFTA Attitude and Feelings Toward Key Actors and NAFTA Arguments

	September			November		
	Noncollege	College	Graduate	Noncollege	College	Graduate
Correlations with NAFTA positions						
Perot	-.045	-.298	-.367	-.676	-.565	-.715
Clinton	.215	.143	.147	.537	.480	.707
Presidents Pro				.691	.812	.798
Anti-Speakers Con				-.441	-.342	-.293
Average gamma with NAFTA beliefs						
Perot	.076	.134	.149	.334	.260	.392
Clinton	.104	.121	.059	.258	.270	.350
Presidents Pro				.407	.434	.501
Anti-Speakers Con				.133	.113	.272

nections between attitudes toward Perot and Clinton and NAFTA positions. The gamma between Perot attitudes and NAFTA positions for the least involved rose from $-.045$ in September to $-.676$ in November. The November correlation for the least educated was higher than that for the middle group (gamma = $-.565$).

Clinton shows the same dynamic: People who approved of him became far more likely to back NAFTA and the correlation was higher for the least involved than for the middle group. The pattern is even more dramatic for belief constraints. People did not connect the messengers with the message in September. They did in November. Even for people with graduate educations, there was virtually no link between one's position on the trade beliefs and evaluations of either Perot or Clinton in September. By November, the level of constraint was far stronger for all three groups. For Clinton, the average gamma was about the same for the least involved and the middle group. For Perot, the least educated showed greater constraint with the trade beliefs than the middle group (gamma = $.334$ versus $.260$).

Perhaps the least educated were simply closing the attention gap. If they were not paying much attention in September but became more engaged in November, this might account for greater issue constraint. But it doesn't. Forty-four percent of the least educated had no positions in September; 37% took no stance in November—still considerably higher than either of the other groups (34% for the college educated and 21% for those with a graduate education). The *most* attentive showed the biggest drop in no positions (a 30% decline).¹⁸ Perhaps the least educated moved the most because the other groups were already strongly supportive of the pact and had higher levels of constraint.¹⁹ But this explanation

does not take us very far. The least attentive increased their support of NAFTA from 30% to 44%, a gain of 14%. But the middle group moved up 12% (from 45% to 57%) and the most attentive by 8% (from 61% to 69%). On three of the four beliefs, majorities of *all* respondents from each group took anti-NAFTA positions. Only on the question of jobs gained was there a clear pro-NAFTA majority and here the bottom and middle groups barely differed.

So what happened? The most plausible explanation (without a panel study to rule out alternatives) seems to be that people got caught up in the public debate. They heard the messages and came down in favor of one side rather than the other. Media exposure increases awareness among all groups—especially the least informed (Berelson et al., 1954, ch. 11). The saturation of the airwaves apparently had a leveling effect. Even people who normally might tune out cannot escape heavy advertising. This is the most plausible explanation for the consistent increases in constraint among the least attentive.

We might expect a discourse with clear messages from both sides to lead to greater polarization (Zaller, 1992, ch. 9). Pro-free trade people would become more committed to NAFTA; protectionists would become even more committed to block the pact. I do not have data to test this directly, but the movement we do observe seems to be largely in one direction—toward the pact. The final two rows for each part of Table 6 point to part of the reason. For every group, the message of the pro-NAFTA forces (the former presidents) got through loud and clear. In November, all three groups showed strong gammas between the positions of ex-presidents and respondents' own NAFTA positions. The correlations were much weaker with the anti-NAFTA speakers. And people associated the former presidents with particular NAFTA arguments. For the less attentive as well as the more interested, people who thought the endorsement of former presidents was important also supported the pro-pact arguments. The substance of the arguments got through. But for the anti-pact speakers, there was no strong linkage, even for the most highly educated. Both sides talked a lot, but only one message got through clearly. By November, all parts of the public appeared to react similarly.

Media campaigns, as Berelson et al. (1954, ch. 11) showed more than three decades ago, often have their biggest effects on the least informed. And NAFTA was everywhere. Even if you did not watch the news, you saw commercials endorsing or opposing it. In brief, the NAFTA debate was a real contest of ideas that engaged large segments of the American public.

OPINION CHANGE AND DEMOCRACY

The NAFTA saga offers both hope and caution for democratic theory. Public opinion shifted significantly in a brief period. Even the supposedly least involved segment of society behaved like the good citizens of a democratic regime are expected to do, linking cues to issue positions to policy prefer-

ences. Nay-sayers might dispute this picture by charging that the massive advertising campaign manipulated public attitudes. Yet, as I noted above, each side spent about the same amount on its campaign. Even though the negative side may have misallocated its resources, it could not make much of a case that the public was getting only one side of the story. The public heard both sides, but seemed to listen primarily to one.

Yet, there are reasons to be cautious. NAFTA offered political leaders an uncommon opportunity. Issues rarely become the focus of a national debate with quite so much media attention. It may be even more unusual for one side to start out far behind and, through the force of a superior campaign and better-known players, come out ahead. Although there is no direct evidence that leaders turned the NAFTA debate around, supporters of the pact had key advantages. Clinton became slightly more popular between September and November, while Perot's favorability ratings fell more sharply. The increased constraint between beliefs on trade and the favorability ratings of the leading spokesmen made the task of pact supporters easier.

The president and his allies had lots of things going for them. They had a more united and better armed coalition than the opposition. And people made up their minds on the arguments rather than narrow self-interest (such as the effect on their own jobs). Yet it would be all too facile to point to the NAFTA debate as a textbook case of how politicians might have succeeded in changing public opinion. Since trade is marked by conflicting values, what goes around may come around (cf. Sniderman and Piazza, 1993, pp. 156–160). By 1997, more Americans believed that NAFTA had failed than felt it had succeeded (Blustein, 1997), suggesting a return to a protectionist majority.

The NAFTA campaign involved a massive advertising campaign more typical of a presidential election than a public debate. When elites put a lot of effort—and money—into a crusade for public opinion, we may witness a major shift in attitudes that makes the public fit the model of reasoning citizens. Few issues can commandeer such resources, either of interest groups or of the key leaders themselves. Democratic opinion change is possible, but democracy is a demanding master.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful for the support of the General Research Board of the Graduate School, University of Maryland—College Park, and to the Everett McKinley Dirksen Center for Congressional Leadership. I have many debts: to Mary Klette of NBC News and to Eric Wolf of Peter Hart Associates for making the NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* surveys available to me; John Audley, Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Keith Krehbiel, Michael Lusztig, Sharyn O'Halloran, George Quester, Wendy Schiller, Robert Shapiro, the anonymous referees, and the editor who read the manuscript and offered sage advice; my colleague Jim Gimpel read the manuscript several times and discussed it with me until he convinced me that some of my earlier claims were wrong; Matthew Farrelly provided valuable computing assistance; John Audley and I. M. Destler were invaluable sounding boards for ideas on trade and American politics.

APPENDIX: Question Wording and Trends Among the Key Variables

Do you favor or oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada that eliminates nearly all restrictions on imports, exports, and business investment between the United States, Mexico, and Canada? If you feel you have not heard enough about this issue yet to have an opinion, please just say so.

	Favor	Oppose	DK	NA	Favor*	Oppose*
September	25	36	34	6	42	58
October	29	33	34	4	47	53
November	36	31	26	7	53	47

Now I would like to read some statements that have been made about what may happen if NAFTA is passed. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each statement.

Some manufacturing jobs will move to Mexico

	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree*	Disagree*
September	74	20	6	79	21
October	49	40	11	54	46
November	49	42	9	54	46

Some jobs will be lost in the U.S., but even more jobs will be created

	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree*	Disagree*
September	40	50	10	45	55
October	42	45	13	49	51
November	50	38	12	55	44

If the North American Free Trade Agreement is passed, do you think that immigration from Mexico into the United States would go up, go down, or stay about the same?*

	Increase	Stay Same	Decrease	Not Sure	Increase*	Stay Same*	Decrease*
September	34	44	18	4	35	47	18
November	26	50	18	6	28	53	19

Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "If NAFTA is *not* passed, Japan and Europe will take advantage of economic opportunities in Mexico and we would lose the chance to export our goods to Mexico."

	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree*	Disagree*
September	53	37	11	59	41
October	39	46	15	46	54
November	48	41	11	54	46

*With don't know/not sure/no answer eliminated.

**Question not asked in October.

NOTES

1. 1977 is an exception to the more general trend of stability: The share of respondents favoring protection rose to 66%; only 18% opposed it. The 1993 figure comes from the NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey discussed below.
2. I examined these don't knows for clues about how NAFTA attitudes are structured in both September and November, but found no consistent patterns.
3. Neither fear of losing one's own job nor having a blue-collar occupation was significant when added to the model in Table 1 below. Demographics mostly do not matter (for either survey), nor do expectations for the future (is the country on the right or wrong track, will the economy improve), or evaluations of Clinton or his economic program. Neither party identification nor self-designated ideology matters.
4. The union variable is coded 1 for the respondent being a union member, 2 if another member of the household is a member, and 3 if no one in the household is a member.
5. I omit Clinton favorability since it is not significant.
6. The negative sign indicates the direction of the relationship; people who expect jobs to be gained are less likely to oppose NAFTA.
7. Concern that immigration would increase fell from 35% to 28% and the share of people who worried that jobs would flee to Mexico fell from 79% in September to 54% in November (see the Appendix).
8. Union membership is not strongly correlated with beliefs in trade. In September the average correlation among the four beliefs and the union membership indicator is .018; in November, it is .061.
9. The negative signs indicate the direction of the impact: People who worry that jobs would flee to Mexico or that immigration would rise were more likely to change to oppose the pact.
10. Hart-Teeter Associates Study #4043, 1, 4. These figures are for all respondents in each survey.
11. The models included dummy variables for whether the respondent voted for Clinton in 1992, the race of the respondent (both white and black), Hispanic ethnicity, independent identification; and measures of age, education, Perot and Clinton popularity, and party identification.
12. This pattern also holds for the ordered probits and regressions (results not shown).
13. Other surveys asking the more standard presidential popularity question show similar small increases. The Pew Research Center for The People and The Press (1998, pp. 2–3) reports an increase in presidential popularity from 43% in early September to 48% in December, while Gallup reports a rise from 46.2% in the third quarter of 1993 to 49.6% in the fourth quarter. The Gallup data come from Donald Green's web site: <http://pantheon.yale.edu/~gogreen/macrepl/Apsr.asc>.
14. Forty-four percent of the least interested had no position on NAFTA in September, compared to 37% of the middle group, and 30% of the most interested.
15. The gammas referred to in the text (and for averages) are reflected, when necessary, so that consistency is always positive. Negative gammas reflect the absence of constraint.
16. This is not immediately obvious from the immigration question, where the trend seems to be the other way. However, this question is a trichotomy. And the anti-NAFTA side lost far more support—to the middle—than the pro-pact forces did.
17. The gap between the most and least involved was 41.8% in September and 24.4% in November.
18. There was a 16% decline in no opinion responses for the least attentive and a 9% drop for the middle group.
19. This explanation is John Zaller's (personal communication).

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