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How Tariffs Became Politically Toxic

CAPITAL ACCOUNT

By Greg Ip

President Trump once called "tariff" the most beautiful word in the dictionary. He has somehow made it one of the most hated words in politics.

In their midterm ads, Democrats repeatedly bash tariffs. Republicans, by contrast, are largely silent. One exception: Michigan Senate candidate Mike Rogers, who calls to "end this tariff war now," while gripping a Canadian- brand beer, now caught up in Trump's trade war.

The uglification of tariffs threatens not just Republicans' midterm chances, but Trump's own legacy. In his first term, he succeeded in shifting the political consensus away from free trade. Upon his return, he could have gone even further by entrenching tariffs in American tax and trade policy. That now looks less likely, especially if Democrats win one or both chambers of Congress.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Even economists, who overwhelmingly deplore protectionism, have long recognized its political appeal. The benefits are concentrated and visible, the costs diffuse and invisible.

And indeed, before Trump returned to office, that presumption still seemed valid. Comparisons across surveys are complicated by differing questions, but pre-election polls typically showed voters either neutral, slightly positive, or slightly negative on tariffs. In an August 2024 Wall Street Journal poll, approval beat disapproval, 47% to 40%.

That changed once Trump entered office. He slapped levies on China, Canada and Mexico, and then, in April 2025, on almost everyone. Opinion turned negative and has become more so this year. Most striking is the shift among the workers targeted to benefit from tariff protection. A poll by Echelon Insights and Economic Innovation Group found those identifying as blue collar went from net three-percentage-point approval of tariffs in August 2025 to net 22 points disapproval last month.

What happened? Trump's trade agenda collided with the public's cost of living agenda, and trade lost. The public blames tariffs even more than the war with Iran for worsening inflation, according to Echelon.

Democrats shouldn't be smug: Exactly the same thing happened to their climate agenda. Reducing carbon emissions was core to Joe Biden's presidency; his signature Inflation Reduction Act poured money into renewables, and his regulators sought in multiple ways to curb oil and gas consumption.

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But as energy prices shot up in the wake of the pandemic, Biden's stimulus and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, concern about climate receded while anxiety about inflation flared. Biden's spending became indelibly linked to inflation in the public's mind. Trump sought to capitalize by attacking Biden's "Green New Scam" and touting fossil fuels.

The link between climatespecific policies (as opposed to Biden's broader stimulus) and actual inflation was weak. The link between tariffs and inflation is a little stronger but hardly obvious to the naked eye. New car prices have barely risen since Trump took office because manufacturers are swallowing tariffs of up to 25% on imported vehicles. Studies that find tariffs added to prices often compare them to a counterfactual in which prices ought to have fallen.

So tariffs became politically toxic less because of their actual effect than how, and when, they were imposed. Trump "enacted a price-hiking policy in a time of severe sensitivity over prices," said Scott Lincicome, a critic of the tariffs at the Cato Institute.

Under the Constitution, Congress has authority over tariffs, which it delegates to the president in specific circumstances. Had Trump asked Congress to raise tariffs selectively, such as on China or on particularly sensitive industries, both parties might have gone along.

Instead, he imposed and removed tariffs at will on adversaries and allies alike often in the service of some personal whimsy, drawing at least one prominent rebuke from the courts. Lincicome said those actions also deeply personalized tariffs, turning Democrats and independents against them by much larger margins than in Trump's first term.

In the 2018 and 2020 elections, though Democratic ads rarely mentioned tariffs or protectionism, they often did so positively, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of AdImpact data. During this midterm, --they mention tariffs repeatedly, and always negatively.

These shifting politics will shape Democrats' strategy should they win control of Congress next month, or the White House in two years. Democrats have repeatedly voted to repeal tariffs or curb Trump's tariff powers, but couldn't overcome opposition by Republicans.

"We should repeal the tariffs and banish [Trump's] cronyist industrial policy to the footnotes of history," said Jake Auchincloss, a moderate House Democrat running for re-election in Massachusetts. "Embrace free trade with free people," he said, meaning with allies but not China or Russia.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, in line to become speaker should Democrats win control of the chamber, has said his party would repeal tariffs. But he hasn't said which tariffs, or how they would be repealed. Trump can likely veto any bill that circumscribes his authority.

Repeal might also get harder by 2028 when domestic industries have gotten used to protection, some of the promised investment has materialized and tariffs are supplying almost $200 billion a year in federal revenue.

And yet as it stands, the odds are diminishing that the sweeping revolution in trade policy Trump embarked on over a year ago survives his second term, even as the more limited revolution of his first term endures.

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