

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

What We Talk About When We Talk About NAFTA

Elite Discourse, Public Opinion, and the North American Free Trade Agreement

by

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Spring 2022

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the  
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

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*Table of contents*

1. Abstract ... 2
2. Introduction ... 3
3. From Manufacturing Belt to Rust Belt ... 7
4. What Elites Say When They Criticize NAFTA: Left- and Right-Coded Responses ... 13
5. NAFTA in the Public Eye: A Qualitative Analysis ... 27
6. Public Opinion and NAFTA ... 39
7. A Symbolic Understanding of NAFTA ... 54
8. Conclusion: What We Talk About When We Talk About NAFTA ... 57
9. Table 4: NAFTA Support ... 60
10. Appendix ... 62
11. Bibliography ... 63

*Abstract*

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) exists, or existed, in two forms. One is its actual form, a preferential trade agreement with tangible economic effects. The other is the symbolic form it occupies in the public consciousness. This paper examines the second form, NAFTA the symbol, through both a qualitative analysis of elite discourse and a quantitative analysis of public opinion polling. Through this qualitative analysis, I find that NAFTA was imbued with this symbolic form during the political debate surrounding its passage, when the politicians who criticized it from the left and the right primed the public to hear the word “NAFTA” and, depending on whom they listened to, think of things like “job loss” or “globalization.” For many on the right, the agreement also became a vessel for symbolic racism: that is, a way to express racial or nationalist sentiments and a resentment of Mexico. The quantitative analysis offers further evidence that the public sees NAFTA symbolically and shows that this view of the agreement has been consistent over time, as support for foreign trade outpaced support for NAFTA in the years before the agreement was replaced.

*Introduction*

“An unprecedented corporate power grab,” wrote activist Ralph Nader (1993: 1). “The worst trade deal maybe ever signed anywhere,” said then-candidate Donald Trump (2016).<sup>1</sup> “A symbol for other things, a lightning rod for people’s anxieties about changes in their lives they have no control over,” lamented Senator Bill Bradley (D-NJ) (Uslaner 1994: 57). These are just some of the ways people understood the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a policy that generated intense debate from before its creation to its eventual replacement. This paper will analyze and explain the attitude(s) expressed in the first two quotes (opposition to NAFTA from both the left and the right) from the perspective of the third quote (a belief that NAFTA often served as a symbol to its critics). Acknowledgments that NAFTA functioned as “a symbol for other things,” though, often neglect to explain what those other things were. Those studies that both acknowledge and analyze the symbolic role of NAFTA (Wiarda 1994; Skonieczny 2000) mostly come out of the debates over its creation, and while they remain quite useful, the intense debate the policy generated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century also needs consideration.

Here, I aim to provide that consideration. Through a careful examination of elite discourse and public opinion polling, this paper confirms and uncovers several things about NAFTA. First, a significant amount of NAFTA discussion is not about the agreement itself or its observable economic effects; generally, this is what I mean when I call NAFTA a “symbol” or claim that a line of NAFTA critique treats the agreement “symbolically.” Calling the agreement “an unprecedented corporate power grab,” or “the worst trade deal maybe ever signed anywhere,” or the kind of proposal that “would destroy the good jobs that produce the taxes that the country needs to pay its bills and build a sound future for American children” (Perot 1993:

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<sup>1</sup>The image that made this line somewhat famous reads, “This has been the worst trade deal in the history of trade deals, maybe ever,” but this is a misquote.

40), are all claims about NAFTA—but they are not criticisms of NAFTA the trade agreement. They are criticisms of an imagined NAFTA that exists as a symbol for anger with specific politicians, as a symbol for anger with the broader effects of neoliberal trade and globalization, or, for many on the right, as a vehicle for symbolic racism. Second, despite most criticism in recent years being highly symbolic, the way people on the left criticize NAFTA has always been different from the way people on the right criticize it. Both left- and right-coded lines of criticism do focus heavily on the economic effects, but even when they do, they almost invariably use the agreement as a symbol for the effects of globalization more broadly. Criticisms of the agreement from those on the left may also focus on the environment and on working conditions in Mexico; those on the right often treat the agreement as an attempt by Mexico to take advantage of the United States, an allegation accompanied by racial or nationalistic rhetoric. Third, NAFTA criticism was consistent; the misgivings people had about the agreement in 2016 were much the same as those they had in 1993. Importantly, this means the cues the public took from anti-NAFTA elites who shaped the symbolic view of the agreement did not become less relevant over time. Four, NAFTA and foreign trade tended to poll similarly until the mid-2010s, when foreign trade became far more popular. Five, any shift in Democratic or Republican support for trade that studies have identified (Uslaner 2000; Choi et al. 2021) in the 1990s pales in comparison to a sharp decline in Republican support for it in 2021; this suggests that only recently has partisanship taken on such an outsized role in determining support for foreign trade. Understanding all these concepts helps to explain NAFTA discourse: to explain what we talk about when we talk about NAFTA.

The most significant implication of this paper is that perception and partisanship may outweigh the economic realities that specific trade policies might bring. In other words, what

happened to NAFTA could happen to any trade policy, regardless of its economic effects. A negative public response nearly doomed NAFTA and has since helped to prevent the United States from entering into policies like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) negotiated and signed under Trump was not the subject of as major a public debate as NAFTA, likely because trade was not the biggest issue at the time: in 2017, the first year of Trump's presidency, Gallup's year-end survey found the economy was only the fifth most important problem to its respondents, the first time in a decade that it was not one of their top two concerns (Newport 2017). Any trade agreement that comes along at a less favorable time would likely face the same stiff, NAFTA-associated opposition as the FTAA and TPP. Perhaps without NAFTA, a new agreement—even the USMCA—could replace it as a symbol for larger frustrations.

This paper is divided into seven sections. The first is the introduction, which lays out the purpose and goals of this project. The second, "From Manufacturing Belt to Rust Belt," examines the region of the United States in which NAFTA seems to have had outsize symbolic meaning. It is in the third through the fifth sections of this paper where I have placed most of the discussion of those five earlier claims about NAFTA and trade. The third section, "What Elites Say When They Criticize NAFTA: Left- and Right-Coded Responses," offers a framework for NAFTA discourse inspired by Howard J. Wiarda's study (1994) and demonstrates the validity of this framework through a thorough analysis of how four major political figures—longtime activist and third-party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, House whip David Bonior (D-MI), businessman and two-time presidential hopeful Ross Perot, and political commentator and presidential candidate Pat Buchanan—talked about the agreement, as well as examining how Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and President Donald Trump discussed it in 2016; I find that even

though both sides talk about economic concerns, those on the right tend to incorporate racial or nationalist rhetoric in their criticism. The fourth section, “NAFTA in the Public Eye: A Qualitative Analysis,” delves further into public pronouncements about NAFTA and examines them over time, demonstrating that NAFTA discourse remained symbolic, consistent, and relevant in the decades after the policy was implemented. For the fifth section, “Public Opinion and NAFTA,” I first created a comprehensive list of public opinion polls on the agreement as I could, calculated what I have chosen to call *relative support* (a simple relative difference calculation to show how much support the agreement had relative to opposition, centered around zero) for NAFTA, and provided a chart with this information. This both provides a snapshot of how people felt about NAFTA at specific points in time and demonstrates the effects of elite discourse on public opinion. Having established how the public felt about NAFTA, I then analyze sentiment over time and compare it to support for foreign trade, identifying a break between the two in the early to mid-2010s. Finally, I briefly examine shifts in opinion on foreign trade itself over time, identifying and interpreting a significant partisan break in 2021. In the sixth section, “A Symbolic Understanding of NAFTA,” I introduce or reintroduce a few theories that apply to my findings, including Lippmann (1922), Zaller (1992), Cramer (2016), Bruter and Harrison (2020), and Oberhauser et al. (2019). In the final section, “What We Talk About When We Talk About NAFTA,” I tie all these themes together and offer some closing thoughts.

Finally, while this paper aims mainly to analyze the public discussions of and opinion toward NAFTA rather than its economic effects, it is still necessary to understand what NAFTA actually was—and here seems as good a place as any to touch on that. The North American Free Trade Agreement eliminated almost all barriers to trade between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. It supplanted the much less controversial Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement

(CUSFTA) signed under President Ronald Reagan. As we will see, the debate over passing NAFTA became a major political battle. We also will see that public opinion often was not on its side: the agreement had little support until before it was passed in December 1993.<sup>2</sup> It was also rare for a majority of poll respondents to have a positive view of it, though a plurality of respondents often did. Its actual economic effects will be discussed later, too, but not at length.

### *From Manufacturing Belt to Rust Belt*

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, geographers observed that a large majority of American manufacturing took place within a region roughly encompassed by a parallelogram with points in Portland, Maine, in the northeast, Green Bay, Wisconsin, in the northwest, St. Louis, Missouri, in the southwest, and Baltimore, Maryland, in the southeast. It was this region that Sten DeGeer in 1927 termed America's "manufacturing belt"—and this perception of the region has endured. The belt had started to take shape in the later years of the 1800s and would by 1900 contain 74% of all American manufacturing jobs; as the century went on, this dominance would remain despite a slight dip: even by 1957, the manufacturing belt accounted for 64% of all such jobs.<sup>3</sup> (Krugman 1991). Its dominance would not last forever, though.

"No region of the United States fared worse over the postwar period" than did the Rust Belt, write Alder et al. (2013). Between the middle and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the share of economic manufacturing and manufacturing employment in the region fell to about one third of

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<sup>2</sup> See Table 4 for the complete list of polling on NAFTA.

<sup>3</sup> While a discussion of why this manufacturing belt developed where it did is beyond the scope of this paper, see Meyer (1983) and (1989) for a theory. The classic image of the Midwest is that of a region already more industrialized than others in the mid-1800s, making it inevitable that most manufacturing would occur there. Meyer believes instead that the Midwest had a high demand for manufactured goods and thus developed a diversified industrial structure that allowed it to provide better for the region. Railroads made transport easier within the region by the 1850s, but interregional transportation was expensive and difficult until the 1880s, when it became a more realistic possibility. By this time, the Midwest was already more able to provide a range of manufactured goods for its own citizens, meaning it was more prepared to become the region that provided manufactured goods to the rest of the country.

the national total; wages for these Rust Belt manufacturing jobs remained higher than they were elsewhere in the country; and labor productivity growth had declined in Rust Belt manufacturing industries, though much of this decline happened before the 1980s. The region was also heavily unionized—the Rust Belt states of West Virginia, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania were four of the five most unionized states in the country in 1975, this in an era when unions' power was rapidly diminishing. Finally, competition from foreign markets increased dramatically starting in the 1980 after years of just a few Rust Belt companies controlling a range of industries. U.S. Steel, Bethlehem Steel, and National Steel had for years dominated continental steel production. The Big Three auto manufacturers—General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler, all in Michigan—made 90% of the cars purchased in the United States in 1958 and 75% or more until the 1980s. Goodyear, Firestone, U.S. Rubber, and Goodrich similarly had controlled 90% or more of the tire market throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Alder et al. claim that it was really only after the policies that prevented foreign direct investment in the 1960s and 1970s were lifted that things started to change<sup>4</sup> (2013). With this point in mind, there are two related implications worth considering: one, the economic decline the Rust Belt has experienced indeed may have been caused by neoliberal economics; but two, that decline had started well before NAFTA.

These economic changes gave rise to an increasingly frustrated populace whose anger was evident both during the debate over NAFTA and in the decades after its implementation. A state like Michigan, home to the Big Three, demonstrates how frustration with NAFTA endured, keeping it as relevant an issue in 2016 as it had been in 1993. For proof of NAFTA's Rust Belt relevance at the time it was first being debated, we can look to politicians' concerns over the agreement starting back in 1993, with a slightly modified table (Table 1) from a congressional

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<sup>4</sup> The question of why this decline occurred is worth further examination but, like many other avenues worth exploring, would expand this paper beyond its limits. This question was discussed in Alder et al. (2013), though I have only used that paper for its four-part analysis of Rust Belt decline.



report on where representatives stood on the agreement. This table lists the Michigan representatives, their party and district, their feelings in September of 1993 (under two months before the House vote) about the agreement on a 1-5 scale where one is the most positive and five is the most negative, their specific concerns about the agreement, and how they voted.

<b>Table 1: Michigan Representative Sentiment Toward NAFTA (circa Sep. 1993, via USA-NAFTA)</b>							
<b>Rep. (Party, District)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Concerns</b>	<b>How Rep. Voted (GovTrack)</b>
Bart Stupak (D-1)					x	Job loss and environment	No
Peter Hoekstra (R-2)		x				Labor side agreements; many in Michigan seem opposed	Yes
Vacant							
Dave Camp (R-4)			x			Mail running against NAFTA; agriculture, sugar, auto industry, and labor concerns	Yes
Jim Barcia (D-5)					x	Campaign pledge; loss of auto jobs, concerns over asparagus farmers	No
Fred Upton (R-6)				x		Labor standards, environment, job loss; has old manufacturing in his district	Yes
Nick Smith (R-7)	x					Flat glass industry and sugar beets	Yes
Bob Carr (D-8)				x		Job loss to Mexico or Southwest United States, environment	No
Dale Kildee (D-9)					x	Jobs and auto industry concerns	No
David Bonior (D-10)					x		No
Joe Knollenberg (R-11)	x					Believes NAFTA is in the best long-term interest of the United States	Yes
Sander Levin (D-12)				x		Job loss, environment, auto sector	No
William Ford (D-13)					x	Job loss	No
John Conyers (D-14)					x	Job displacement, auto industry, and job retraining, especially for minority groups	No
Barbara Rose-Collins (D-15)					x	Job loss	No
John D. Dingell (D-16)					x	Job loss, labor, environment	No

In Table 1, we can see that the most common worry representatives from Michigan expressed was that the agreement would cause job loss. Twelve of the state's fifteen members of Congress mentioned job loss or labor concerns as a factor in their deliberation. Only Republicans Peter Hoekstra, Nick Smith, and Joe Knollenberg, all of whom already were leaning toward voting yes (and eventually did), expressed no concern about job loss in their districts. The high level of concern is not surprising: as we will see in the next section, job loss has been a truly unifying NAFTA concern; critics of the agreement from the left and the right alike seemed to believe the agreement would result in American manufacturing jobs being outsourced to Mexico (though someone's place on the political spectrum determined how exactly they talked about this issue). Something else that leaps out immediately about the vote is its partisan divide: all ten members of the Democratic delegation voted against the agreement, and all five Republicans voted for the agreement.<sup>5</sup>

For a specific example of why job loss was such a resonant issue, we can look to an ethnography of rural Manistee County, Michigan,<sup>6</sup> conducted in 2017 by Sarah Marsh (2019). Between 1981 and 1986, four large employers—which ones are not specified—left Manistee, leading to the loss of hundreds of jobs (Marsh 2019). These jobs disappeared a decade before

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<sup>5</sup> Michigan was one of only three states, along with Connecticut and Wisconsin, with a Congressional delegation containing both Democrats and Republicans where the NAFTA vote was entirely along party lines. There appears to have been a much stronger relationship between party affiliation and NAFTA vote—or at least between Democratic Party membership and voting no on NAFTA—in Rust Belt states. In the Obama-Trump states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, all 21 Democratic House members and all five Democratic Senators voted No; 17 of the states' 20 combined Republican House members and their lone Republican Senator, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, voted Yes. These Rust Belt Democrats' unanimity in opposing NAFTA greatly outpaces their party's sentiment toward it nationally. Overall, just 156 of 258 (60.5%) Democratic representatives and 28 of 55 (50.9%) Democratic senators voted against NAFTA. This disparity becomes more striking when the total numbers are taken against the votes of Democrats from across a broader sample of the Rust Belt (Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and New York), where 54 of 59 Democratic Representatives and all ten Democratic Senators voted against NAFTA. In other words, among Democratic members of Congress from the Rust Belt, there was near-universal opposition to NAFTA. Put simply, region was extremely important in determining whether a Democratic politician would support NAFTA, and Democrats it was clearly not in the Rust Belt (GovTrack).

<sup>6</sup> As Marsh also notes, Manistee was one of twelve counties in the state that went for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and then went for Trump in 2016, undergoing a swing of 20.9% between 2012 and 2016 (Marsh 2019).

NAFTA took effect, and surely counties across the Rust Belt would tell similar stories. This is not to discount that NAFTA had some impact. Many early studies (Weinstein 1998), economists (Warf and Kull 2002), and public officials (Serra and Espinosa 2002) argued that the agreement had in fact created jobs. But critics of the agreement were never reluctant to disagree. The progressive website Citizen.org, citing a study by the also-progressive Economic Policy Institute (EPI), contended that 43,600 jobs were lost in Michigan thanks solely to the trade deficit with Mexico since the creation of NAFTA. During the NAFTA-WTO period (starting in 1994), Michigan had lost a net total of 168,403 manufacturing jobs by 2018. And the percentage of private sector jobs in manufacturing in the state declined from 24.6% to 16.9% in that same period (Citizen.org 2018).

Evaluating the actual economic claims about NAFTA is hardly the focus of this paper, but it is worth offering claims that seem to more accurately capture its actual effects. Some have made the narrower—and perhaps likelier—claim that some areas were hit much harder than others. McLaren and Hakobyan (2016) take up the claim that NAFTA “had a disparate impact geographically,” finding that “blue-collar workers, especially high-school dropouts, but not college graduates,” were indeed disproportionately affected. Flint, Michigan, was one such place where the agreement had a demonstrable negative effect (McLaren and Hakobyan 2016). In other words, there are surely specific factories that moved because of NAFTA, and thus specific areas that were affected by NAFTA—but on balance, it seems unlikely that NAFTA alone is responsible for an outsize amount of job loss. More likely is that NAFTA just became one highly visible symbol for a larger problem: the effects of globalization on American manufacturing, a claim with which other economists sympathetic to NAFTA critics’ concerns, like Peter Karl Kresl (2005), would agree: “what does remain valid in the concerns expressed by NAFTA

dissenters is their evaluation that the agreement was just the next step toward realization of what they referred to as the neoliberal agenda” (Kresl 2005).

Michigan was home to two significant political upsets in 2016: Bernie Sanders’s (I-VT) win in the Democratic primary and Donald Trump’s win in the general election. “The white working-class voters who supported Sanders come from communities that have been hurt by trade deals,” noted one study of the Democratic campaigns in that election. “Many have directly experienced downward mobility or have come to expect it for their children. If they were once Democrats, they may no longer be.” Sanders went to Michigan “Trumpeting a career-long opposition to [NAFTA] and its spawn, he ... pulled out a narrow but clear victory in Michigan” (Fertik 2016). Donald Trump, too, campaigned there quite explicitly on the basis that he would rewrite trade deals and turn the state from the Rust Belt back into the manufacturing belt. “It used to be cars were made in Flint and you couldn’t drink the water in Mexico. Now, the cars are made in Mexico and you cannot drink the water in Flint,” said Donald Trump on the campaign trail (*RealClearPolitics* 2016). But he promised to make it “the manufacturing hub of the world once again.” (Spangler 2016). Clearly, the region experienced job loss during this period, and regardless of how much of it is due to NAFTA, attacking the agreement evidently had a strong resonance with the public—and this resonance can be seen in elite discourse and in turn on election results. While the Rust Belt did undergo significant economic decline, and while much of this surely could have been due to neoliberal trade policy, it seems that relatively little of it was because of NAFTA. We can see from the contextualization in this section that NAFTA indeed generated significant debate in the Rust Belt, but also that the amount of attention it got was likely disproportionate to its economic effects. In the next sections, I will examine what exactly prominent critics said about the agreement—and more importantly, why they said it.

*What Elites Say When They Criticize NAFTA: Left- and Right-Coded Responses*

“What is going on here? Clearly, the NAFTA debate has become something more than just a trade debate. But what precisely is it? What is at stake? Why is the issue so hot? For what other issues and agendas does NAFTA serve as a smoke screen?” These are not questions posed by people attempting to understand the debate around NAFTA when it sprang back onto the political scene in 2016: they are questions political scientist Howard J. Wiarda asked in 1994, shortly after NAFTA was enacted. They are also the questions that animate this paper. The debate over the passage of NAFTA was divisive, unleashing “nationalist, xenophobic, demagogic, and even racist currents.” Why did this happen over a trade deal? For Wiarda, the short answer was that international and domestic politics had become completely intertwined. While older trade agreements, like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), were seen as important, they were rarely politicized, widely discussed, or debated publicly; but suddenly, when NAFTA appeared, this changed. Modern negotiations of trade deals must take into account “political topics such as pollution, the environment, drugs, human rights, and democratization ... farm and industrial subsidies, patents and trademarks, industrial standards, child labor, minimum wages, unionization and labor rights, government purchasing, and investment issues—all areas that are close to the bone of national economic policymaking.” And as we can see, “As these new and more complex issues entered into trade discussions, both the intensity of the debate and the decibel level have risen” (Wiarda 1994: 117-119).

Wiarda also offers a 22-point ordering of arguments against NAFTA (135-7) that, while useful as a starting point for understanding criticism of the agreement, fails to capture what is really going on. His dividing up of arguments into four different categories (substantive concerns with no clear answer, substantive concerns that have potential solutions, red herrings and

strawmen, and political issues related to different agendas) hints at the symbolic nature of anti-NAFTA discourse but fails to capture why critics of the agreement said what they did. So, building on Wiarda's ideas, I offer an updated framework for examining how people attacked the agreement. First, in Table 2.1, I offer an ordering of common NAFTA criticisms and classify them as *domestic economic concerns*, *well-being concerns*, and *procedural concerns*. Next, in Table 2.2, I offer observed motivations for criticism, which fall into two categories. The first is *economic or political* motivation, which encompasses reasons related to a critic's economic worldview and their desire to gain some political advantage through their criticism. The second is *racial or nationalist* motivation, which deals with anti-Mexico sentiment that goes beyond just populist or protectionist rhetoric and clearly plays on public prejudices about the country, along with sentiments that again rise beyond protectionism and turn the debate into a question of populist nationalism that pits us vs. them, like that discussed in Ian Bremmer's book by the same name (2019).

Finally, one might say that the motivation for politicians' *racial or nationalist* rhetoric is often cynical and solely for political gain, and that it should therefore fall under the *political* side of the first category. But at this point, attempting to guess at politicians' cynicism or sincerity is unlikely to be as productive as simply noting that they chose to talk about NAFTA in this way. And in the case of some elite criticism, the cynicism claim seems unlikely. Additionally, as we will see later, much of the criticism that currently falls into these categories ultimately fits under the umbrella category of *symbolic* criticism. So, for the purposes of the analysis in this section, it does not matter *why* someone employs this type of rhetoric as much as it that matters that they *do* employ it.

<b>Table 2.1: Issues</b>	
<b>Domestic economic concerns</b>	Job loss
	New competition
	Wage depression
<b>Well-being concerns</b>	Environmental damage/pollution
	Lax consumer standards in Mexico
	Poor working conditions in Mexico
	Would hurt family farmers in Mexico
<b>Procedural concerns</b>	Concerns over corporate/elite support
	Concerns over how it was passed

<b>Table 2.2 Motivations for NAFTA criticism</b>	
<b>Economic or political</b>	<b>Racial or nationalist</b>
A belief in protectionism	Condescension toward Mexico
A stand-in for other trade policies/globalization	Defensive/isolationist sentiments
A way of attacking the politicians responsible for it	General dislike of/prejudice toward Mexico
Desire not to antagonize labor/environmental groups	Nationalism/America-first sentiments
For electoral advantage	

In the following paragraphs, I show examples of each anti-NAFTA argument and each motivation; I also show that most criticisms from these tables have remained relevant, shaping public opinion toward the agreement for more than two decades. These anti-NAFTA talking points were especially resonant in the Rust Belt states, and their foundations were laid by elites,

some on the left and some on the right. Why focus on elite discussion? I will discuss theoretical frameworks in later sections, but briefly, I proceed here from the assumption that Walter Lippmann (1922) and John R. Zaller (1992) are correct about the public being at a distance from the information they receive and about elite discourse therefore providing an enormous influence over how the public interprets things. NAFTA was a relatively abstract policy whose actual effects were always going to be hard to pin down, particularly because of how the public interprets trade, which I also take up in later sections. (Guisinger 2017). Maybe even to a greater extent than other policies, many people did not know what to make of it and took cues on its effects from agents they trusted with political issues. If elite-level discourse and messaging are usually largely responsible for what the public thinks about a given issue, these have likely had an unusually large effect on how people have thought about NAFTA.

Additionally, this paper is not the first study to provide a *symbolic* understanding of how people interpreted *corporate/elite support*, which was often depicted as a battle between elites and the people they represent—and, as we will see, was a prominent feature of criticism of the agreement. Mayer (1998) also applies this analysis. “As the politics of NAFTA moved outside the Washington Beltway,” which has become “a symbolic boundary” dividing Washington insiders from Washington outsiders, “it also spilled out of the usual confined trade circles and into the public domain.” And, writes Mayer, “In this arena, the opponents had the upper hand” (Mayer 1998: 219).

Keeping this in mind, I will now move to discuss some of the most prominent anti-NAFTA voices at the time debate around the agreement was raging, and the time the agreement started to take on its enduring *symbolic* form: two on the left in Ralph Nader and David Bonior and two on the right in Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan. From there, I also bring in Bernie



Sanders's and Donald Trump's criticisms of NAFTA in recent elections to demonstrate the durability and consistency of the *symbolic* form the agreement took on. The logic here is to put prominent names and personalities to the attitudes, as well as to see where items from Table 2.1 and Table 2.2 fit into the attitudes commonly expressed by those who had sway over the public and the narrative. This will both explain the specific *symbolic* shape that NAFTA took and start to highlight the rhetorical difference in how elite-level discourse on either side of the political spectrum tried to sway people against the agreement. All six of these highly visible NAFTA critics spoke out, wrote, and campaigned extensively against the agreement, meaning there is plenty to discuss here.

Ralph Nader, in the opening chapter of *The Case Against "Free Trade,"* a book containing chapters by several progressive activists who oppose NAFTA and other agreements, writes that "An unprecedented corporate power grab is underway." NAFTA would "make the air you breathe dirtier and the water you drink more polluted. It would cost jobs, depress wage levels, and make workplaces less safe. It would destroy family farms and undermine consumer protections ... And that's only for the industrialized countries" (Nader 1993: 1). Immediately here, we see complaints that NAFTA would cause *job loss*, *wage depression*, and *environmental damage*, while exploiting *family farmers* and the *lax consumer standards in Mexico*. This was all happening with little public accountability, which Nader sees as a sure sign that something is wrong: "One can be properly suspicious of the intent of these trade agreements given the process by which they have been negotiated" (3). The negotiation process, barriers to entry for the average citizen (like a government printing charge of \$41 to anyone who wished to order and be sent a copy of George H.W. Bush's NAFTA proposal), and the actual text of the agreement being nearly illegible to anyone not deeply familiar with trade negotiations all "pose such a

threat to the procedural gains of citizen movements” (5). For Nader, this was a situation in which corporations jockeyed for a lead in how best to profit from developing nations’ necessarily lower environmental, worker, and consumer protection standards—and this all means we can add *concerns over how it was passed, concerns over corporate/elite support, and poor working conditions in Mexico* to the previous set of issues. With Table 2.2 in mind, we can say that Nader was using NAFTA as *a way of attacking the politicians responsible for it*, knowingly or unknowingly using it as *a stand-in for other trade policies/globalization*, and operating as an *environmental group leader*.

Nader was far from the only person on the left frustrated with how NAFTA was passed: so were public officials like House whip David Bonior (D-MI). Writing in his policy-focused 2018 autobiography, Bonior starts to recount his experience with NAFTA in the 1992 Democratic primary, from which Bill Clinton, then Governor of Arkansas, would emerge victorious. Resisting the Democratic Party’s shift toward centrism, Bonior withheld his endorsement of Clinton despite the rest of the House Democratic leadership opting to back Clinton: Bonior claims that by the time the primaries started, he was the lone leader to withhold his endorsement. In his telling, Clinton would call him up after each primary victory and try to wheedle him into providing it. “Each time Clinton called, I had only one question for him. After congratulating him on his fine showing that day I’d bring up NAFTA.” Bonior, though, worried that NAFTA would impose “a ‘neoliberal’ trade regime” that “would pit workers from Mexico against workers in Canada and the United States in a race to the bottom. Without adequate labor and environmental protections embedded inside the agreement—and they weren’t—I foresaw a decline in well-paying US jobs, especially in manufacturing” (Bonior 2018: 337-8). Here, we see worries over *job loss, wage depression, new competition, and environmental damage*, along with

concern over *poor working conditions* and *lax consumer standards in Mexico*. Bonior repeatedly tried to push Clinton to support labor protections, but he refused to discuss them (337-8).

As a Democrat from Michigan, it is unsurprising that Bonior would express opposition, and unsurprising that his opposition would not diminish with time. While his concerns may have come partly from a *desire not to antagonize labor groups* in his home state, as well as a closely related interest in gaining an *electoral advantage* through these criticisms, Bonior affirmed that he had not warmed to the agreement in the years since it passed. He criticizes the fact that it had only *corporate/elite support* and that “These ‘neoliberal’ trade policies often ignore the progressive struggles for workers’ rights and human rights” (357). People who doubt these effects “really ought to take a tour of the industrial Midwest. He’d get a look at the devastation NAFTA has wrought: the abandoned factories, the closed shops on a thousand Main Streets, the broken dreams of once proud middle-class families” (361). And here it is also evident that Bonior is using it as a *stand-in for other trade policies/globalization*. “Disappointed” by the passage of the agreement, Bonior continued to withhold his endorsement of Clinton—but gave in when it became clear the Arkansas governor would be the Democratic nominee to face pro-NAFTA Republican President George H.W. Bush and anti-NAFTA businessman Ross Perot in that November’s election (Bonior 2018: 338).

Ross Perot pitched himself as “a political Lone Ranger who could ride into town and clean up the mess,” writes Bonior (344)—and for Perot, part of that mess was NAFTA. “At this critical time, we must do nothing that will lower the standard of living of the American worker,” wrote Perot in the unnumbered opening pages of the descriptively-titled *Save Your Job, Save Our Country: Why NAFTA Must Be Stopped—Now!* (Perot 1993). This short but comprehensive issue book, published in mid-1993, attempts to sway readers against the agreement, with Perot

touching on all of NAFTA's flaws as he sees them. But what he chooses to foreground in his attack on the agreement is quite different from what either Nader or Bonior had to say about it. The core of Perot's argument against NAFTA is that it represents America being both sold out by its elites and ripped off by Mexico.

While one might read the previous paragraphs of this paper and ask whether we do not also implicitly see *condescension toward Mexico* in Nader's and Bonior's criticisms of the agreement, Perot offers that much more explicitly. He vilifies Mexico continually, as Perot attempts to cast the debate over NAFTA as one in which two actors—Mexican and American elites—conspire against the best interests of the American worker. In the first chapter, "Out Traded—Again," Perot details the many ways Mexico will benefit at America's expense, from trucking to banking to agriculture; in the second, "A Secret Deal," he details this selling out of American labor by a simultaneously disorganized and greedy group of backroom elites. In his book, one can find every point from Table 2.1: fears of *job loss*, *new competition*, and *wage depression*, concern over *environmental damage/pollution* and both the *lax consumer standards* and *poor working conditions in Mexico*, and perhaps most importantly, *concerns over how it was passed* and over *corporate/elite support*.

With Perot, we start to see *racial or nationalist* criticisms joining the *economic or political* criticisms. Mexico plays a large and conspicuously negative role in the book that makes his repeated reminders that the agreement would in fact have a negative effect on the nation's workers seem less sincere. Perot clearly believes there is rhetorical value to repeatedly invoking Mexico as an enemy; even if the only reason Perot criticizes the nation and its leadership this way is because he knows it will reach some people better than an argument that deals purely with the economic effects of the agreement, the book clearly operates on there being some value in

attacking Mexico specifically. Questions of economic development aside, it seems safe to say that anti-Canada rhetoric surely would not have the same resonance as anti-Mexico rhetoric. This is not to suggest Perot is not self-aware about how some will perceive his arguments. In the chapter titled “Selling NAFTA,” he grapples with a list of “NAFTA Myths,” the top item on this list being that “NAFTA Critics Are Racists.” Perot’s response: “The fact that American workers don’t want their jobs moved to Mexico is not ‘racist’” (66). Again, it seems fair to say that while fears of job loss are hardly racist, grounding those fears in arguments that Mexico is deliberately attempting to take advantage of America clearly go beyond criticisms of the economic effects of the agreement.

Perot being so concerned about allegations that his NAFTA criticism is racist is quite telling. For reasons made clear in the framework provided in Table 2.2, evidently there is a reason Ralph Nader and David Bonior did not have to include Perot-style disclaimers about racism in their own cases against NAFTA. Yet in his anti-NAFTA rhetoric, Perot combines *attacks on the politicians responsible for it, a belief in protectionism, and a view of the agreement as a stand-in for other trade policies/globalization with prejudice toward Mexico, condescension toward Mexico, and nationalism/America-first sentiments.* This means Perot believed the most effective way to get political results was to employ both *economic or political* and *racial or nationalist* criticisms. And that was of course Perot’s goal. In the back of his book are a pair of appendices, one that lists around three dozen former government officials working to pass NAFTA and another that compiles the telephone and fax numbers of every sitting U.S. Senator and Representative. The book was intended to convince people to apply political pressure to members of Congress, and if that meant vilifying Mexico, so be it.

*Save Your Job, Save Our Country!* was not written by Perot alone. It was co-authored by Pat Choate, a fierce opponent of globalization with whom Perot would run on his Reform Party ticket in 1996. That party's next presidential nominee would be the right-wing author and pundit Pat Buchanan. During his first presidential run, Buchanan, then a Republican, took the stage at the 1992 Republican National Convention and claimed there was "a religious war going on in this country ... a cultural war ... for the soul of America" (Buchanan 1992). Though he was not discussing trade, he would spend his career talking about it in terms not too different from these. From Buchanan's earliest days in the public spotlight, he was one of the few prominent right-wing ideologues who leveled strong criticisms against NAFTA, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and neoliberal developments more broadly: for him, it seems, international trade inherently could not be mutually beneficial. In his most thorough anti-free trade polemic, *The Great Betrayal*, Buchanan lays out plainly his views on the shortcomings of trade and makes his case against globalization.

Unlike Perot's work, which came amid a heated debate over whether NAFTA should be passed, Buchanan is writing several years after the passage of NAFTA, meaning he discusses the effects of trade in general. For him, "free-trade theory is first cousin to socialism and Marxism" (Buchanan 1998: 44).<sup>7</sup> A global economy that sees every nation trade freely is nothing less than "the surrender of national sovereignty" (71). And Buchanan does not stop there: to him, "Global free trade is a Faustian bargain. A nation sells its soul for ... foreign goods. First the nation gives up its independence; then its sovereignty, and finally its birthright—nationhood itself" (72).

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<sup>7</sup> Many, like conservative author Norman Podhoretz, have called attention to the fact that Buchanan routinely leans on barely concealed anti-Semitism. In *The Great Betrayal*, Buchanan alludes to NAFTA as "Kissinger's New World Order" (264), part of a pattern of associating foreign trade with Jewish conspiracies: Buchanan called the 1995 Mexico bailout the "Rubin" bailout, after Clinton treasury secretary Robert Rubin, and he termed deals that were negotiated by Clinton administration trade adviser Charlene Barshefsky the "Barshefsky" trade agreement. That is, he connected those policies "whenever possible with the obviously Jewish names of their sponsors" (Podhoretz 1999).

Buchanan was unusual in that he talked about all international trade, not just NAFTA, in these extreme, nationalist terms. When he claims sarcastically that we should “Tear down the border posts! Throw open America’s doors to all those who wish to shop here, sell here, move here, live here. Nationality means nothing” (74), he is proposing that this is the logical conclusion of trade itself as he sees it, not just of one policy.

Buchanan is evidence that *racial or nationalist* reasons for disliking NAFTA can be completely detached from the policy issues related to the agreement while still fitting into a larger and consistent worldview. Buchanan suggests Mexico has “designs on the American Southwest,” conceding that while most Mexican Americans “love this country and serve it honorably,” there are regardless a “militant few” for whom “America is the occupying power” (274). For Buchanan, free trade is a slippery slope. It can lead to Marxism, the loss of national sovereignty, and increased immigration. I will not dwell too long here on analyzing critically what Buchanan is saying, because he is so open about his motivations. But we can categorize his arguments as *a belief in protectionism, general dislike of/prejudice toward Mexico, condescension toward Mexico, defensive/isolationist sentiments, and nationalism/America-first sentiments*. Buchanan thinks in extreme terms but actually recognizes that global trade and internationalism in general are far more than NAFTA—though his fears of the policy have almost nothing to do with the actual issues seen in Table 2.1 and are little more than the *racial or nationalist* arguments that we see in Table 2.2.

At the end of the last section, I briefly touched on Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and the resonance of anti-NAFTA rhetoric in the Rust Belt in the 2016 campaign, when the agreement suddenly found itself subjected to renewed scrutiny after years of diminished attention. To demonstrate the general consistency of how people on the left and right talked

about NAFTA, we can again look to what exactly both Sanders and Trump have had to say about the agreement. Sanders's opinion on it never wavered. In an op-ed he penned in October of 1993 upon returning from a trip to Mexico, Sanders, then a representative, touched on the same themes as Ralph Nader and as his then-House colleague David Bonior. Manufacturing jobs would leave America, and the factories where corporations were outsourcing labor were going to force Mexican workers to labor under brutal conditions for very little money; that is, NAFTA would cause *job loss, wage depression*, and exploit the *poor working conditions in Mexico*, all of which he feared would accelerate already-rising inequality (Sanders 1993). In a 2020 Tweet, Sanders remarked that “NAFTA did not just destroy 1 million American jobs—it forced millions of Mexican family farmers off their land” (Sanders 2020). Again, *job loss* and fears that it *would hurt family farmers*, coded as *economic* and *well-being concerns*, endured among NAFTA critics on the left. By making the claim that it destroyed one million American jobs, Sanders is also using it *for electoral advantage* in a presidential contest in which he was running, making an appeal to *labor groups* who oppose the agreement, and using it as *a stand-in for other trade policies/globalization*.

Trump, meanwhile, described NAFTA as a “total betrayal” of American labor: yet again, we see *job loss* has maintained its relevance for whoever is criticizing NAFTA. Like Perot and Buchanan, Trump blamed both elites for having sold out the country and Mexico for taking American wealth: “Our politicians have aggressively pursued a policy of globalization, moving our jobs, our wealth and our factories to Mexico and overseas” (C-SPAN 2016).<sup>8</sup> In addition to

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<sup>8</sup> Trump also said in this speech that “Globalization has made the financial elite, who donate to politicians, very, very wealthy. I used to be one of them.” (C-SPAN 2016). There are strong echoes of both Perot and Buchanan in other ways here, too. Bonior sees a lot of similarities between Trump and Perot. Likening his business background and irreverence to the future President, Bonior's description of Perot as a “political lone ranger” (Bonior 2018: 344) clearly aligns with Trump's self-styled image as an outsider coming to Washington to clean house. Buchanan draws Trump comparisons from others: for example, an article in *Politico* in the last issue before the 2016 election called Trump “Pat Buchanan With Better Timing.” In it, “just about all the themes of Trump's campaign can be found in



*job loss*, the fact that the agreement had *corporate/elite support* and a fear of *new competition* came up routinely in Trump's anti-NAFTA rhetoric. These are *economic* and *procedural concerns*; we see no discussion of *well-being concerns* in this line of criticism. Present here are several *economic or political* motivations, namely a hope that it will bring him *electoral advantage*, use of the agreement as *a way of attacking the politicians responsible for it*, a belief in *protectionism*, and treating it as *a stand-in for other trade policies/globalization*; when examined along with what else Trump has said about Mexico, it is clear that he also has *racial or nationalist* motivations for criticism, employing *general dislike of/prejudice toward Mexico for various reasons*, *defensive/isolationist sentiments*, and *nationalist and America-first sentiments* in his anti-NAFTA statements.

We can establish a few things from this discussion. The first is that *domestic economic concerns* are the unifying type of public opposition to NAFTA. Whether a person went out and bought Nader's *The Case Against "Free Trade"* or attended a Trump rally in the Rust Belt, they would come away from it having heard about how NAFTA would or had cost the United States jobs. But more importantly, we can establish that there are clear divides in the way Nader, Bonior, and Sanders talked about NAFTA and the way Perot, Buchanan, and Trump talked about NAFTA. Those on the left here are far more focused on Mexican workers' and farmers' *well-being* and do not attempt to convince the public that Mexico is the enemy, like those on the right generally do. Both, however, tended to express *procedural concerns* about the agreement. Now that the issues that animate each side are clear, we can look to Table 2.3 for a straightforward accounting of what motivated opposition to the agreement.

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Buchanan's insurgent primary run ... the grievances ... the dark portrait of a nation whose culture and sovereignty are threatened from without and within; the sense that the elites of both parties have turned their backs on hard-working, loyal, traditional Americans" (Greenfield 2016).

<b>Table 2.3: Left- and Right-Coded Elite Responses</b>		
	<b>Left (Nader, Bonior, Sanders)</b>	<b>Right (Perot, Buchanan, Trump)</b>
<b>Motivations for NAFTA criticism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A stand-in for other trade policies/globalization</li> <li>-A way of attacking the politicians responsible for it</li> <li>-Desire not to antagonize labor/environmental groups</li> <li>-For electoral advantage</li> <li>-Condescension toward Mexico (possibly)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A stand-in for other trade policies/globalization</li> <li>-A way of attacking the politicians responsible for it</li> <li>-Defensive/isolationist sentiments</li> <li>-For electoral advantage</li> <li>-General dislike of/prejudice toward Mexico</li> <li>-Nationalist/America-first sentiments</li> </ul>

We can see from Table 2.3 that while those on the left and right both talk about Mexico, even if they often raise the same types of concerns, they have very different motivations. On the left, anti-NAFTA discussion tends to be *economic or political* and not surprisingly does not have *racial or nationalist* undertones; one could argue that those on the left adopted an inherently paternalistic attitude by suggesting Mexican farmers and workers are just the helpless victims of the United States, so I have included it in the chart. For critics on the right, though, attacks on NAFTA are not just *economic or political* but often *racial or nationalist*. That is, they go beyond the bounds of typical us-vs.-them rhetoric employed in trade, instead treating Mexico as the culprit for American job loss for which it is not responsible. In this way, and particularly in Trump’s case, these right-coded motivations seem to use NAFTA as an excuse to criticize Mexico. In Perot’s case, it seems plausible that he was doing the opposite, that his goal really

was defeating NAFTA, and that he was criticizing Mexico because he knew there would be people with whom anti-Mexico rhetoric would resonate. Finally, as we move to the next section, it is worth considering a point from earlier in this one. NAFTA critics on both the left and right linked the agreement to *job loss*, critics on the left discussed the *well-being* of both American and Mexican workers, and critics on the right had *racial or nationalist motivations* for saying what they did—but all these criticisms would remain consistent over time to create the broad category of *symbolic* NAFTA criticism, and I discuss this next.

### *NAFTA in the Public Eye: A Qualitative Analysis*

The last section establishes that even if they raise the same issues, NAFTA critics on the left and NAFTA critics on the right talk about the agreement in different, *symbolic* ways. Perhaps this means exaggerating the economic effects of the agreement by using it as a stand-in for globalization, as both sides did, or perhaps it means using the agreement to express racial or nationalist sentiment, as those on the right did. This section will provide a thorough qualitative analysis of public opinion that attempts to introduce and contextualize the polling analysis I will provide in the next section. Who sees NAFTA as a symbol? When was discourse surrounding the agreement at its most relevant? How did NAFTA's supporters talk about the agreement? How can we reconcile the high levels of support NAFTA enjoyed with experts with its middling popularity among the rest of the public? This section will attempt to answer all these questions through a textual analysis of how NAFTA was discussed and debated over the twenty-plus years it was in effect. Through this analysis, the major takeaway is that NAFTA, at least as it is discussed within the public sphere, is for the most part seen *symbolically* by the public and often

serves as little more than a political tool whose actual economic effects are divorced from what people say about it.

What would the public have been hearing about NAFTA when it was passed? Two months before the House voted to pass the agreement, longtime conservative columnist George Will wrote, “jobs lost because of NAFTA may be more conspicuous and easy for an opponent to point to than jobs that did not exist until created by forces unleashed by NAFTA” (Will 1993).<sup>9</sup> This is an excellent summary of the difficult position politicians found themselves in. What is important here, though, is that we can establish that some commentators recognized the fact that NAFTA had become an avatar for a range of other frustrations since before it was enacted. The politicians who were involved in the political battle over the agreement recognized this better than anyone else: “NAFTA has become a symbol for other things, a lightning rod for people’s anxieties about changes in their lives they have no control over,” said Senator Bill Bradley (D-NJ) in September 1993 (Uslaner 1994: 57).

The public likely had a largely symbolic understanding of the debate surrounding NAFTA both before and after the agreement was passed. There are various analyses of the NAFTA debate that offer, say, electoral hypotheses about why particular representatives voted different ways,<sup>10</sup> but here I will discuss how the debate came across to the public. Then-second term representative Collin Peterson (D-MN)<sup>11</sup> said in one hearing that the debate around NAFTA

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<sup>9</sup> Will continues, “careerists in the House of Representatives, who think the key to serving 30 years is never to think more than two years ahead, are reluctant to vote for anything ... if its benefits would be apparent only after the next election” (Will 1993). I am no great fan of George Will, but I think this is true, especially in the case of NAFTA.

<sup>10</sup> There are many interesting discussions of this that ultimately I just did not think it useful to include. Posadas (1996) provides an overview of what NAFTA debate looked like at the congressional level. Livingston and Wink (1997) offer a Clinton-oriented analysis of who voted for NAFTA and why. Robert (2000) looks to the international level to examine how the agreement was negotiated. Maxwell (2000) is a broad overview of the politics of passing NAFTA. And my favorite was the (I believe) flawed but fascinating *The Selling of “Free Trade”* by John R. MacArthur (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Peterson was one of the most conservative House Democrats during his three decades in Congress, representing a rural district and losing in 2020. Peterson would vote against NAFTA.

“is about cheating productive Mexican workers out of their rightful pay and forcing United States workers making 7 times that [the Mexican workers’ salaries] to accept wage and benefit cuts to compete with these lower wages” (concerns over both American and Mexican workers’ well-being). Peterson correctly notes, though, that this is not all about NAFTA. Quoting a *Business Week* article, he says that what is going on is part of this “new, brutally competitive world economic order that is emerging from the demise of the cold war. To stay competitive, companies are locating more facilities abroad, eliminating jobs, and investing in technologies to boost productivity.” (U.S. House 1994). The economic and development gap between Mexico and the United States and Canada has always been a significant factor, as evidenced by rhetoric, substantive concerns, and recent academic studies of the subject (Flores-Macias and Sánchez-Talanquer 2021). After all, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement had been in effect for several years already and had generated far less debate than NAFTA. It seemed it was only when Mexico was brought into a potential agreement that the American public became wary.

Amy Skonieczny takes up this idea in “Constructing NAFTA” (2000). The popular American public image of Mexico was “inferior, childlike, dependent, and suspicious.” For those doubtful about the agreement to be swayed required “a discursive construction of NAFTA that emphasized a positive U.S. self-image through American myths thereby allowing the simultaneous acceptance of Mexico as inferior and as an equal trading partner” (Skonieczny 2000: 433). Skonieczny reaches these conclusions through a creative and incisive analysis of how NAFTA was advertised to the American public. Though NAFTA was “uninteresting as a trade accord,” she concludes that it “became important to the average American when it was attached to the American Dream ... in the same way that it gained urgency when represented under the Isolationism and Populism myths,” as she terms the way Perot and others on the right

talked about the agreement (452). That is, NAFTA only even became interesting or appeared relevant to many Americans once it went from policy to symbol. Both sides of the symbolic nature of the agreement were constructed by its supporters and by its detractors before it passed: that is, symbolic factors completely unrelated to the agreement's actual policy effects were likely the difference between its passage and its failure; I will provide a further discussion of the agreement's passage in the next section. But only the negative symbol would endure.

Skonieczny's research suggests that much of the public quickly gained a symbolic understanding of NAFTA. Whether that symbolic view has since meant that one attributes outside economic effects to it or uses it as a way of expressing symbolic racism, economists often have been left on a different page from the rest of the population. This divide is clear from their reports. Early analyses of the effects of NAFTA started to appear toward the end of the decade. A June 1997 Congressional report found that its effects had been largely positive, creating somewhere between 90,000 and 160,000 jobs and increasing both imports to and exports from Mexico. A study by the International Trade Commission from that same month suggested modest export gains to Mexico. Another report by Sidney Weintraub for the Center for Strategic and International Studies suggested America had gained more jobs than it had lost due to the agreement. And an analysis by the labor-funded EPI, which unsurprisingly has offered no shortage of criticisms of NAFTA, contended that the agreement already had cost the United States a total of 420,208 jobs and worsened the already observed problems of blue-collar workers. But for the most part, economists were optimistic: there was even hope that NAFTA could expand to encompass all of North, Central, and South America into one big free trade zone (Weinstein 1998).

In April of 2001, every Western hemisphere leader but Cuba's Fidel Castro gathered in Quebec City, Canada, for the third Summit of the Americas. Near the end of the conference, the leaders announced a plan to push for a new policy just like the one some economists had imagined: the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Unfortunately for them, the public was unenthused about this idea—as were many politicians. With the battle over NAFTA relatively fresh in their minds, and with questions still being raised over the agreement, it was unlikely that anyone would want to expend the political capital that would be required to push through another free trade agreement. The vocal critics of globalization on either side of the political spectrum had not simply disappeared. (Warf and Kull 2002). For all these reasons, the FTAA proposal went nowhere. It is interesting to imagine what the debate over such a proposal would look like in light of NAFTA, but it seems extremely likely that the fight over that agreement and the lack of passionate public support for such an idea were important in preventing the idea from taking off. It would have taken another intense PR campaign, like that for NAFTA, to rally any kind of support for a new agreement and reshape the negative symbolic perception it had—and this was probably not enough of a priority for most American politicians to want to push for it.

Economists at the “NAFTA at 10” conference, hosted by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in December of 2002, continued to illustrate this divide. In fact, it is interesting to note the surprising optimism the people at these conferences had about agreements like NAFTA relative to the rest of America.<sup>12</sup> They often acknowledge but do not seem to really foreground a fact that seems obvious: that enacting new agreements would require an intense and expensive rallying of public support. This is not to suggest they do not realize this, but on some level, they seem to be dealing with an idea of what should happen that was completely unrealistic given the political climate (NAFTA at 10). Again, it would have required

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<sup>12</sup> There was a significant NAFTA-related polling divide than that between economists and the broader public.

an enormous and very expensive public effort to enact a free trade agreement of this magnitude—and until the USMCA, which replaced NAFTA in 2019, there had been only one agreement this significant attempted since NAFTA: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It is worth noting, though, that neither this failure to enact similar policies nor controversy ever dissuaded many mainstream economists and NAFTA advocates from continuing to argue for the agreement. For example, Jaime Serra and J. Enrique Espinosa, two of Mexico’s chief NAFTA negotiators, defended the agreement in a 2002 article, claiming that it had been positive for Mexican workers (Serra and Espinosa 2002).

The clearest way to account for the divide between the public and economists in opinion toward NAFTA is to consider the different ways each group saw it. For the public, it played a mostly symbolic role, while experts with a high level of information about the agreement probably saw something closer to the “true” NAFTA. As Walter Lippmann writes in *Public Opinion* (1922), most people live at a remove from the reality of events. He writes, “the real environment is ... too big, too complex, too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” Most people must create “a simpler model” to process events (Lippmann 11). But economists are not at such a remove. They are highly informed actors who we can assume possess greater knowledge about the actual effects of NAFTA than the public. That they are much more supportive of NAFTA than the public should be our first sign that the agreement’s symbolic role soon became a negative one. Advocates may have managed to link NAFTA to the American dream in 1993 (Skonieczny 2000), but the enduring image has been that of an agreement with a range of ill effects on American manufacturing workers, as that is all the public has heard from politicians.

These symbolic anti-NAFTA arguments may have endured, but I do not mean to suggest that those arguments disappeared after the NAFTA debate only to reappear whenever politicians



proposed new trade agreements. Zaller (1992) argues that people do not have mental filing cabinets with dossiers on each policy that they can pull out at will; rather, people's opinions are quite often formed with whatever opinion is at the "top of the head," while "a long unused set of considerations may be ... forgotten" (Zaller 1992: 48). So, when NAFTA took on an outside role in the 2008 Presidential election, particularly on the Democratic side, it did not happen out of nowhere: it happened because of a global recession that increased skepticism toward trade in general, and because the candidates, particularly then-candidate Barack Obama, brought it up. Obama campaigned against the agreement in 2008, perhaps helping him to get elected but perhaps costing him when he tried to pass trade deals. But Obama attacked NAFTA because it was a trusted, proven symbolic tool that would be perfect for attacking political figures whom the public would see as members of the establishment that had sold them out with the agreement.

In this case, the target was Hillary Clinton, who distanced herself strongly from any earlier NAFTA support. "You know, I have been a critic of NAFTA from the very beginning. I didn't have a public position on it ... but when I started running for the Senate, I have been a critic," said Clinton in a February 2008 Democratic primary debate with Obama. Clinton was working to retract her earlier support for the agreement, noting that, while some regions had benefited, in "upstate New York, I've seen the factories closed and moved. I've talked to so many people whose children have left because they don't have a good shot. I've had to negotiate to try to keep factories open ... because the companies got tax benefits to actually move to another country." NAFTA, she said, needed to be fixed, as "It was, unfortunately, heavily disadvantaging many of our industries, particularly manufacturing." Obama fired back, noting that Clinton had claimed in her 2000 Senate campaign that NAFTA had been good for her home state of New York and for the nation overall. And he disagreed. "I think that it did not have the

labor standards and environmental standards that were required in order to be good for Wall Street but also be good for Main Street ... [in Illinois,] you will see entire cities that have been devastated as a consequence of trade agreements that were not adequately structured to make sure that U.S. workers had a fair deal.” Neither went as far as claiming it should be eliminated entirely, but both wanted it renegotiated (Cleveland Debate 2008).

This debate provides further evidence that NAFTA held special significance in the Rust Belt. It was held in Cleveland—in other words, in the largest city in the Rust Belt state of Ohio. NAFTA was mentioned a total of 26 times in this debate; in the previous two debates between Clinton and Obama, in Austin and Los Angeles, it had a total of one combined mention (Austin Debate 2008; Los Angeles Debate 2008). The moderators and candidates clearly thought it merited more attention in a Rust Belt state. The most notable observation here, though, is the fact that it was so unambiguously a toxic policy with which to be associated; embracing it was not an option, even—or especially—for Hillary Clinton. This tells us plainly that there was nothing to be gained by supporting, that the enduring symbolic NAFTA image is a negative one. In a case like this, the agreement serves as useful shorthand for telling voters that a candidate does not have their best interests at heart. The reverse, one candidate criticizing another for *opposing* NAFTA, essentially never happens. Despite having some regional relevance in the presidential election, trade was a larger issue during the 2012 election than the 2008 election. Citizen.org claimed Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney spent over \$30 million each on commercials criticizing trade—more than twice as much as had been spent on trade-related ads in the 2008 election. Down the ballot, congressional candidates ran 125 commercials that mentioned trade, and of these, only one expressed support for NAFTA (Citizen 2012). With all this in mind, it is no real surprise that the TPP would meet with such sharp opposition.

That NAFTA had taken on a mostly negative symbolic image was perhaps most evident during the debate over the TPP, the closest America had come to a serious attempt at a new free trade agreement with a scope comparable to that of NAFTA in the then-two decades since it was passed. “Specter of NAFTA haunts Obama,” read one *Politico* headline. It was 2014, and Obama was holding a meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, hoping to leave the conference in a stronger position to pass the TPP. “Some of these old agreements put us at a disadvantage,” said Obama. “That’s exactly why we’ve got to have stronger agreements.” Obama adviser Ben Rhodes claimed the TPP sought to “elevate the standards that were absent from the NAFTA agreement so that we are dealing with issues like labor and environmental standards that are important to 21<sup>st</sup> century trade.” This sort of claim fell on deaf ears. “Twenty years after NAFTA, we are now getting [TPP] forced on us, with the same kinds of incentives to outsource jobs,” said critics, labeling the TPP “NAFTA on steroids.” Progressive activist Lori Wallach, who has written and campaigned extensively against trade agreements, referred to it as “a massive 12-nation NAFTA expansion” (*Politico* 2014).

This all demonstrates that that the negative symbolic image of NAFTA was powerful and enduring enough that it could be used as a rhetorical weapon against political candidates and new preferential trade agreements. TPP had not even been written yet (and would be very different from NAFTA) but the battle lines already had been drawn, and the criticisms already had been made: and they were the same as those NAFTA and the FTAA. People saw the TPP, and would have seen any trade agreement of this scale, as something dangerously similar to NAFTA. This is additional strong evidence, twenty years on, of how successful NAFTA critics on both the left and the right had been in crafting an enduring symbol: the image of NAFTA they had created had called into question whether anything even resembling it could be good for America. As

Barutciski (2009) noted in a panel discussion titled “NAFTA at 15 Years,” “NAFTA has become a powerful symbol to the American, Canadian, and Mexican public. It is not always a very positive one.” (Barutciski 2009).

TPP’s unpopularity again brought the question to the minds of economists: “One of the questions is, if NAFTA is so successful, why is there opposition?” asked economist Caroline Freund at the “NAFTA at Twenty: The Past, Present, and Future of the North American Free Trade Agreement” conference at the Hoover Institution. In a panel discussion focused on “Evaluating NAFTA’s Effects,” she identifies several reasons: anti-globalization, high global unemployment, wage stagnation, outsourcing having become “a touchy subject,” inequality, labor, the environment, immigration, and trade deficits. Many of these reasons for opposition go beyond the United States and are not helpful in understanding how the American public viewed the agreement, but anti-globalization indeed played a large role in understanding the symbolic role of NAFTA. Interestingly, though, Freund contends that many of these issues, one of them being anti-globalization, were fading by the time NAFTA’s twentieth birthday had rolled around. (Boskin 87-88). This proved to be untrue. As the final panel of the conference sat down to discuss “NAFTA’s Next 20 Years,” the speakers mostly agreed: it was not necessarily going to be easy to keep pushing trade forward, but it was possible—and it was surely for the best (142).

With the election of Donald Trump, the long-floated idea of renegotiating NAFTA became a reality. Economists started to ask questions about what this renegotiation process would look like, as well as what the actual economic effects would be: “the question must be asked: Where would the US be without NAFTA?” asked economist Phil Levy. Potential obstacles to trade between North American countries, Levy warned, would both hurt consumers and undermine producers. Even if the observable economic effects of the agreement were

relatively small, Levy warns that we would be wrong to discount the other effects of NAFTA—a the biggest of these being the counterfactual of whether Mexico would ever have developed economically to the extent it had if NAFTA had never existed. Levy also concludes that tearing up NAFTA would make America look like an unreliable trading partner, possibly damaging its global standing (Levy 2017). Even in this understanding, the decision to withdraw from NAFTA relates just as much to how the rest of the world perceives America as it does to the actual economic effects of the agreement.

Other recent research arrived at similar conclusions about the observable economic effects of revoking NAFTA on the United States. Auer et al. (2018) concluded that the potential revoking of NAFTA would have almost no effect on U.S. welfare, reducing it by around 0.2%, but that districts that voted heavily for Trump in the 2016 election would in fact experience greater reductions in real wages than the average district if the agreement were revoked. The effects are even more interesting on the state level: the five states of Wisconsin, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Ohio, most of which are in the Rust Belt and all of which voted for Trump, had the most to lose (Auer et al. 2018). This suggests an even greater disconnect than one might expect between perception and effects when it comes to NAFTA—though again, this kind of evaluation of the economic effects is somewhat beyond the scope of this paper.

Economists remained aware that this kind of gap between rhetoric and reality existed, even if they did not always grapple with it. Lester and Manak (2018), in their attempt to understand what we should expect of the Trump-negotiated USMCA, note that populist leaders who criticize globalism and free trade are often unclear about what exactly they will do to solve the problems that they believe internationalism causes (Lester and Manak 2018). Their focus, like that of many economists, overlooks the possibility that apparent economic discontent is

actually frustration about something else. In other words, analyses that focus on the purely economic effects of trade deals should conclude not that anger over NAFTA and international trade is unfounded: they should consider that this anger is not really about economics at all. Analyses that incorporate this point of view provide a richer understanding of both the economic and political situation in America. In a late 2017 article, economist Tyler Cowen went so far as to conclude that “Economic theories of populism are dead, we Americans just don’t know it yet.” The recent “nationalist turn in global politics” has little to do with economics. “Instead,” he writes, “the intellectual and cultural battles in some countries have led to these new political directions under a wide variety of economic conditions.” While populism and nationalism can of course be born out of economic concerns, the debate over NAFTA demonstrates that they often come from elsewhere. As Cowen writes, “If citizens fear for cultural cohesion, relatively small pieces of bad economic news may take on an outsized importance in their minds.” After all, “economic data are usually interpreted through a cultural lens” (Cowen 2017). Any analysis of modern trade discourse that provides this kind of understanding is likely to be much more revealing than one that deals only in economics.

From all this, we can answer the questions posed earlier. The American public, thanks to the debate surrounding the agreement, had come after the passing of NAFTA to see it as a negative symbol rather than just an economic policy. Discourse surrounding the agreement was at its most relevant whenever it became politically useful to discuss the agreement, whether this meant Barack Obama (and later Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump) using it as a tool to criticize Hillary Clinton, or activists like Lori Wallach invoking NAFTA whenever other preferential trade agreements were on the table. NAFTA proponents and defenders tended to have higher levels of knowledge about the actual economic effects of the agreement, supporting NAFTA

because they believed it was mostly good policy. This is how we can reconcile experts' high levels of NAFTA support with the lack of public enthusiasm for the agreement: one group generally saw it as an economic policy, while the other saw it as the symbol elites had created for it at the time of its creation. Beyond racial or nationalist motivations for attacking the agreement, we can say the economic frustration surrounding the agreement was also symbolic; this is not to say people's concerns over the agreement were entirely unfounded, but that many of the effects people attribute to NAFTA are in fact effects of globalization more generally rather than effects of NAFTA alone. As mentioned earlier, a significant implication here is that the many issues people claim to have had with NAFTA will not disappear simply because the agreement has been replaced with the very similar USMCA. Perhaps in the future another agreement—even the USMCA itself—could become a new target for this kind of anger.

### *Public Opinion and NAFTA*

In this section, I collect and analyze polling conducted on NAFTA. The first four sections of this paper have focused mainly on what politicians, economists, and pundits have had to say about the agreement, and I believe I have demonstrated several things: that NAFTA became an enduring symbol for bigger concerns about globalization, that those on the right tended to bring racial or nationalist motivations to their criticisms of NAFTA, and that NAFTA took on a mostly symbolic role in public evaluations of the agreement. With all this in mind, I now discuss the shifts in public opinion toward the agreement over time through a careful examination of public opinion polling—which I have thus far deliberately avoided using.

To do this, I have compiled all available polling data on support for and opposition to NAFTA from 1992 to its repeal. The complete list can be seen in Table 4. One goal of this is just

to provide a more comprehensive review than other papers. Some studies (Aguila et al. 2008; Bowman et al. 2008) have already done this on a smaller scale, making a serious attempt to collect and gather public opinion polls on the agreement. But these studies have not made as thorough a list or analyzed the meaning of these changes in support. In addition to searching the Roper Center site for polls on NAFTA, I have used articles, books, and polling site archives to compile a thorough list of polls dealing with public sentiment toward the North American Free Trade Agreement. Polls included in this list asked a variation of a) “Do you support NAFTA?” b) “Do you believe NAFTA benefits the U.S.?” c) “Do you believe NAFTA has been good for the U.S./the U.S. economy?” This of course means that many other NAFTA-related polls I encountered have not been included here, and details about which polls I have chosen to list here and which ones I have chosen to omit are included in the appendix. Though NAFTA was not polled as consistently as, say, opinions on foreign trade in general, which results in gaps in NAFTA opinion in the early 2010s, I believe this list is both as detailed and as accurate as possible. With this information, I add significant context to a statement made less than a decade after NAFTA was passed, that “Attitudes about NAFTA have gone through a complex evolution” (Warf and Kull 2002: 215).

While the simplest way to present this data might seem to be a double line graph tracking support for and opposition to NAFTA over time, there are problems with this approach. A graph that did this would show what appear to be enormous leaps in support and opposition, when really we are just seeing question wording effects<sup>13</sup> or uncertainty about the agreement. For instance, an April 2013 poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA) that asked respondents whether NAFTA had been good or bad for the U.S. economy returned 52% support

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<sup>13</sup> Why this occurs is a question that might deserve its own study on the wording effects of questions with NAFTA as a case study. Even apparently similar questions have occasionally gotten very different support results.



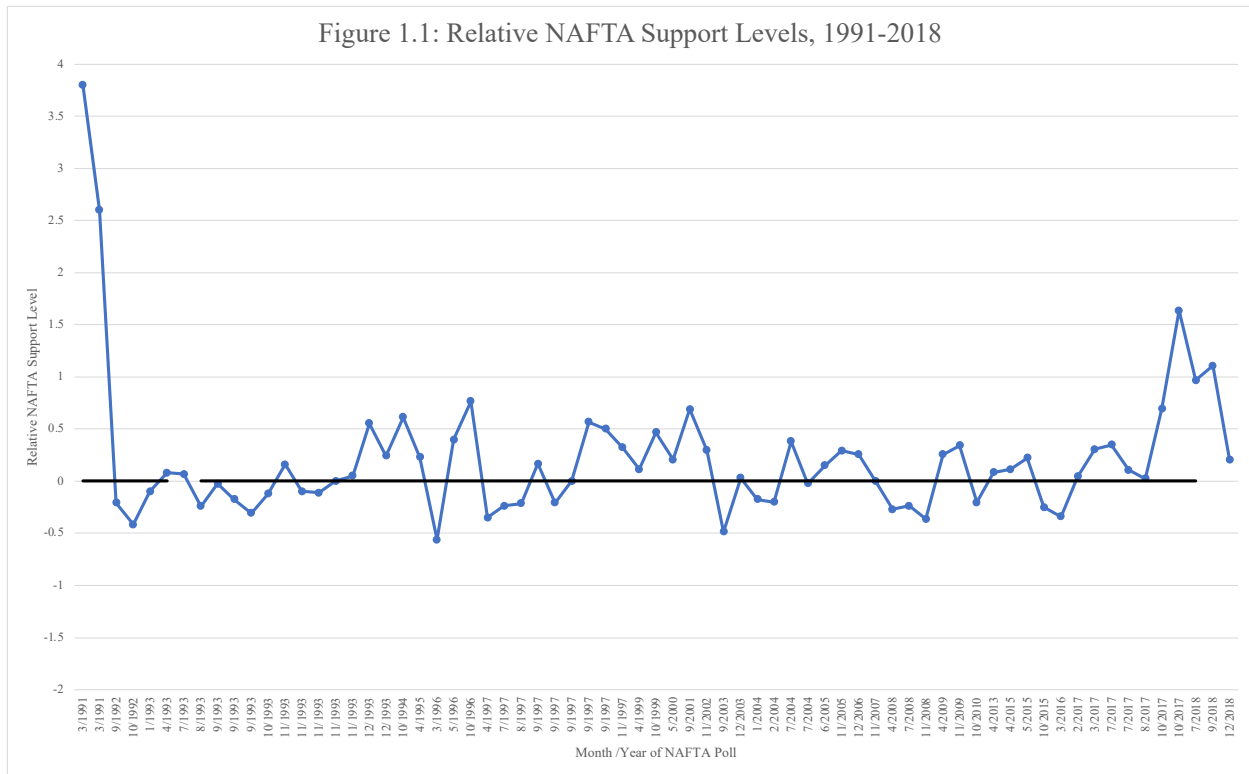
for and 48% opposition to NAFTA. But an NBC News-*Wall Street Journal* poll conducted in April 2015 that asked the same question (but gave respondents the option to say it had not had much of an effect or that they were unsure) found just 29% support and 26% opposition. The inclusion of an option to express uncertainty can only result in lower levels of support and opposition; and this difference is compounded by the fact that people were being forced by renewed discussion of trade, thanks to the TPP and early rumblings in the upcoming presidential election, to reconsider where they stood on a deal like NAFTA. I would suggest that there might have been fewer unsure respondents in 2013 than 2015 had the CCGA included an option for people to say they did not know: perhaps another analysis in the future could examine how the number of respondents saying they were unsure what to make of NAFTA changed over time.

All this means that I have instead decided to present the data as a graph where I track what I will call *relative support* for NAFTA, calculated using the simple relative change formula

$$\text{Relative change}(x, x_{\text{reference}}) = \text{Actual difference}/x_{\text{reference}} = (x - x_{\text{reference}})/x_{\text{reference}}$$

$$\text{Relative support} = (\text{support} - \text{opposition})/\text{opposition}$$

With *relative support*, the CCGA poll shows NAFTA support of 0.083, while the NBC-*WSJ* poll shows NAFTA support of 0.115. Just taking the actual difference of these polls would show net support and tell us that 4% or 3% more people supported NAFTA than opposed it. But relating these numbers to opposition both tells us that it had 8.3% and 11.5% more net support than opposition—and, I believe, results in a more readable graph. This graph is seen in Figure 1.1, which appears on the next page. Support is centered around zero, which signifies equal support and opposition levels.



The first dramatic shift is noticeable in the years before NAFTA was debated. The earliest polling was conducted by Gallup in March of 1991, nearly three years before the eventual agreement was signed. The polling firm took two surveys that posed the same question:

*“As you may know, Canada and the United States now share a free trade agreement which ensures that trade between the two countries is not subject to tariffs or large import quotas. It has been suggested that a wider free trade zone could be established, consisting of Canada, the United States, and Mexico. In general, do you think a North American free trade zone consisting of these countries would be mostly good for the United States, or mostly bad for the United States?” (Gallup 1991).*

The response in each of these polls was overwhelmingly favorable. In each, 72% of respondents supported the creation of such a free trade zone, with just 20% in the first poll and 15% in the second opposing it. Their *relative support* was 4.8 and 3.6, respectively, drastically higher than support for the agreement at any later point. The most obvious explanation for this high level of support might be that these early polls were conducted before NAFTA became NAFTA—not just in the sense that the question asks respondents about a free trade zone, but in

the sense that discourse surrounding the agreement had not yet been settled. Clearly, people were open to the idea, and perhaps the question wording primed them to support this agreement if they had favorable ideas about the CUSFTA, which the question mentions immediately before asking them to offer their opinion about the nascent version that would include Mexico; other research shows that this tends to affect survey responses (Zaller 1992). Skonieczny's idea that American acceptance of NAFTA required a "discursive construction" of the agreement applies here—but what explains this early support for a potential trade agreement with Mexico if America innately viewed the country as "inferior, childlike, dependent, and suspicious" (Skonieczny 2000: 433)? These polls may complicate Skonieczny's findings: perhaps it was only when racial or nationalist rhetoric was linked to NAFTA that some started to worry about a deal with Mexico.

Next, we can shift the focus to public opinion during and after the debate over its passing, through two studies. The first is Jeffrey A. Cohen's treatment of the passing of NAFTA as a case study in understanding whether the agreement was a case of elite response to public opinion. Cohen observes that, as Figure 1.1 shows, the public was at best ambivalent about enacting the agreement: in most of the polls taken in the months before the vote on NAFTA, the *relative support* was below zero, and large numbers were unsure about the agreement. This had been true since September of 1992, the month President George H.W. Bush originally had been planning to sign off on the agreement (Cinar and Gulotty 2021). But if the public was generally unsure, "the so-called Establishment" was tremendously supportive of NAFTA. Clinton brought all the living former presidents in to endorse NAFTA, and many businesses and economists also threw their support behind the agreement; a November 9 debate between Gore and Perot was seen as another victory for pro-NAFTA forces. This resulted in a small shift in public opinion toward NAFTA in the final days, a shift that happened at a useful time for supporters of the agreement

(Cohen 1997: 225-228). Regardless, it was not enough to call NAFTA a response to public opinion, as Mansfield and Milner (2012) find is true of many preferential trade agreements.

The second study, a 1998 project carried out by Eric M. Uslaner, complicates somewhat the picture that Cohen draws. Uslaner uses polls from the days shortly before the House voted to pass NAFTA to study an unusually quick shift in public opinion: an eleven-point swing in favor of the agreement over the two-month period between September and November 1993. This shift did not come from undecided voters picking a side at the last minute; nor, counter to conventional wisdom at the time, was it a result of the Gore-Perot debate. Instead, Uslaner concludes that the shift in public opinion was a successful pro-NAFTA campaign ultimately paying off. Public opinion had already started to shift before the debate, and the amounts of money spent by NAFTA's opponents and its advocates were not wildly different, yet one side won out. It appears that people looked at the options presented and the people on either side of the argument, weighed the costs and benefits, and then gravitated toward NAFTA. The pro-NAFTA message itself resonated with voters, larger numbers of whom came to believe between September and November that the agreement would bring economic growth, would not drive up immigration, as some had started to fear, and would not cause jobs to go to Mexico.

While Cohen and Uslaner have different ideas about what exactly caused the shift in public support of NAFTA, there is no disagreement that this change was real, and that it was caused largely by elite support. This of course raises the question of why pro-NAFTA messaging was more effective than anti-NAFTA messaging at the time the agreement was passed, only for the idea of NAFTA as a negative symbol rather than a positive one to endure. While Uslaner demonstrates that voters responded positively to pro-free trade messaging in the months before the House voted on NAFTA, one aspect of this successful message was the fact that a near-

unified elite backed it. Nearly a fifth (17%) of all respondents to the NBC-*WSJ* polls conducted in the two months before the House vote said the living former presidents' support for NAFTA had made them much likelier to support it; just 42% of respondents claimed pro-NAFTA elites would have no effect on their positions. Compare this to anti-NAFTA elites' effect on public opinion: 10% of all respondents said Perot's and others' criticism of NAFTA made them much less likely to support it, while 63% said those opponents' criticism would have no effect on their support. And Clinton's popularity rose between September and November, while Perot's fell. Changing support for elites was itself not significant enough to account for the complete rise in public support for NAFTA: this was caused by a larger share of the public buying into the arguments those elites made. But elites did provide cues that helped to sort the public into anti- and pro-NAFTA camps (Uslaner 1998). Evidently, elite support was a positive for many.

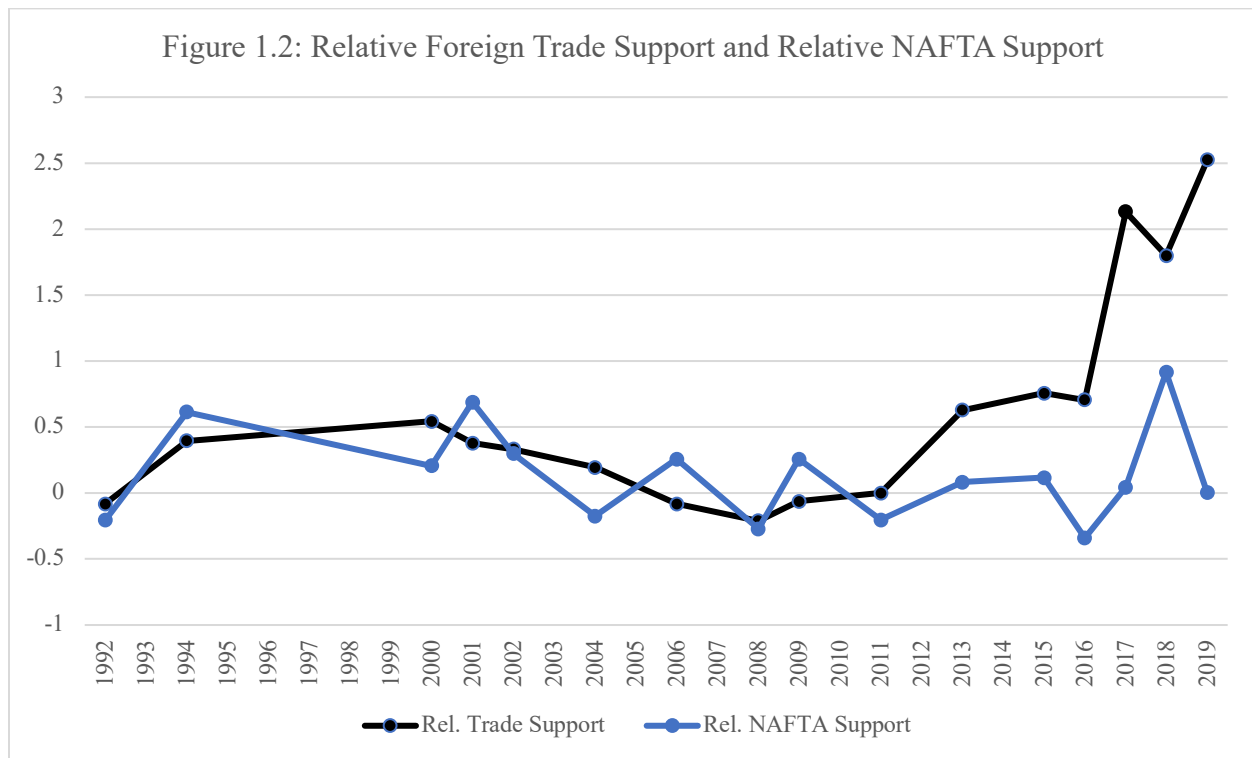
A third NAFTA polling event worth examining is what happened in 2008, as seen in Table 3. The financial crisis had caused many to turn inward and become wary of trade altogether (Pew 2009), Barack Obama repeatedly used the agreement against Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary, and *relative support* for NAFTA fell into the negatives after several years above zero. Between a November 2007 Pew poll that found equal support for and opposition to NAFTA (40% each) and an April 2009 Pew poll that found *relative support* of 0.257 (44% support-35% opposition), the agreement had negative *relative support*.

Polling Outlet	Month/Year	Support%	Oppose%	Difference	Relative Support
Pew	Dec-06	44	35	9	0.257
Pew	Nov-07	40	40	0	0
Pew	Apr-08	35	48	-13	-0.271
CCGA	Jul-08	42	55	-13	-0.236
Gallup	Nov-08	37	58	-21	-0.362
Pew	Apr-09	44	35	9	0.257

For a time, at least, NAFTA was quite unpopular, before quickly rebounding. But this was likely not a reflection of attitudes toward NAFTA in particular: it demonstrates how, for two decades, people's feelings about NAFTA mirrored their feelings about international trade in general. "Attitudes about NAFTA reflect the public's views of trade more broadly," one study concluded shortly after the turn of the millennium (Warf and Kull 2002: 217). Yet this statement needs updating after the 2010s, when opinions on NAFTA and trade diverged. We can see that public opinion toward the agreement, once linked closely to public opinion on trade, is volatile and elite-driven—whether those elites are driving people to support the agreement or oppose it.

I demonstrate this in Figure 1.2, where I take the *relative support* calculation from earlier and apply it to a set of Gallup polls that asked respondents whether they saw foreign trade as an economic opportunity. Again, I have avoided using actual support, because I believe it would create an inaccurate representation of where Americans really stood on trade and NAFTA. For example, if I took the actual support of each issue and compared the same NBC-*WSJ* poll mentioned earlier in which just 29% expressed support for the agreement to the corresponding 2015 Gallup poll, in which 58% expressed support for foreign trade, it would create an apparent disparity of 29 points; NAFTA would appear to be only half as popular as foreign trade, which would overlook the fact that, despite a high level of uncertainty, only 26% expressed opposition to the agreement. While the mid-2010s do represent something of a low point in people expressing a positive or negative opinion on NAFTA, which I believe is due to the fact that it suddenly came to occupy a prominent place in public discussion, questions about NAFTA support have almost always returned higher levels of uncertainty than these Gallup questions about foreign trade in general. So instead of actual support, I have compared the *relative support* in each Gallup data point on free trade to the *relative support* of the nearest corresponding data

point on NAFTA. Usually these are not perfectly aligned (e.g., a November 2010 Pew poll on NAFTA and a February 2011 Gallup poll on foreign trade), but I list them together in Figure 1.2 as they are close enough in time to provide strong comparisons.



The immediate takeaway from this graph should be that what we talk about when we talk about NAFTA is, or at least has become, something different from what we talk about when we talk about foreign trade. In other words, NAFTA has become a symbol, while foreign trade apparently has not. The major findings here are apparent. One, public opinion on NAFTA tracked at least roughly with public opinion on support for foreign trade until the mid-2010s; the first noticeable divergence comes in 2013, when *relative support* for NAFTA was at 0.083 and *relative support* for foreign trade was at 0.629. Two, NAFTA support is somewhat more volatile than foreign trade support, routinely logging *relative support* below zero, but it has been mostly

consistent. Sometimes, like in 2008, this is probably due to external factors that also made trade less popular, but we also see that when NAFTA was under the greatest attack, it became less popular. This suggests people took strong cues from elites' criticism of the policy throughout its existence. Three, NAFTA support became decoupled from support for foreign trade in the 2010s; even when NAFTA, too, took a leap in popularity, it did not match the popularity foreign trade enjoyed late in the decade.

The differences in *relative support* for NAFTA and foreign trade were first evident in 2013 and became even more drastic as the 2016 campaign heated up. In a breakdown of the organization's 2014 poll on foreign trade, Gallup analyst Lydia Saad notes that growing public support for trade is associated with confidence in the economy—a correlation that is consistent with the negative public sentiment seen toward both NAFTA and trade in 2008 (Saad 2014). Yet in the 2010s, NAFTA support lagged behind the popularity that foreign trade suddenly enjoyed. This is further evidence that the symbolic view of NAFTA indeed had taken hold with the public, which was less positive toward the agreement than it was when it came to foreign trade: many must have seen NAFTA as something different from trade in general—and whether that something was job loss, globalization, or Mexico ripping off America, it was not good.

In 2016, NAFTA support plummeted amid a rise in anti-globalization rhetoric before starting to rise again soon after, though not to the levels of foreign trade support. Bernie Sanders on the left and Donald Trump on the right helped to shift public opinion further against NAFTA, but it quickly recovered after this, rising to levels of support it had not enjoyed since those early 1991 polls. This is likely because support for NAFTA had, to many people, evidently become a way of distancing themselves from Trump. After not having polled on NAFTA for years, Gallup asked respondents in February 2017 whether they believed the agreement had been good for



America or bad for America and found a stark partisan divide. Among Democrats, NAFTA had 67% support, and among Republicans, it had just 22% support. This was not the case in earlier polls the organization had done on NAFTA; such divisions had been much smaller (Swift 2017).

One might look at these results and ask whether *relative support*, question wording effects, or some other methodological factor might be responsible for the differences observed in the graph. But if there are questions about whether there is something else at play here that can account for the differences, the 2017 data points should answer them. These are the two Gallup polls conducted in February of that year: two polls conducted in the same month by the same organization that capture a large difference in support for foreign trade and support for NAFTA. The foreign trade poll found that 72% of respondents believed it was an economic opportunity to 23% who believed it was not. The NAFTA poll found that 48% of respondents believed the agreement had been good for the United States to 46% who believed it had not (Swift 2017). In other words, twice as many respondents said NAFTA was bad for America as said foreign trade was bad for America. Clearly, this difference was real and is not just a result of methodology.

The past two paragraphs raise the question of just how party affiliation affects public support for and opposition to foreign trade. Choi et al. (2021) observe that prior to NAFTA's passage, those with protectionist views preferred Democrats, but during the Republican Revolution of the mid-1990s, people holding these views started to support Republican candidates at much higher rates. This shift is larger among demographics that are identifying at higher and higher rates with the Republican Party, specifically white men without college degrees. Uslander (2000) also observed the flipside: that "By the 1990s, with the ascension of Bill Clinton to the White House, the Democrats once more picked up the mantle of free trade," which they had abandoned during the 1970s and 1980s. While Uslander mostly dismisses the

institutional explanation—that “when the Republicans took over the Presidency, they shifted toward more free trade—and when the Democrats regained the Presidency, they too became more supportive of open markets” (Uslaner 2000)—the past two decades of polling has given us access to larger amounts of data that should make us revisit the institutional perspective. We can evaluate these claims with Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3 (Younis 2021)



This suggests that neither the party switching explanation nor the institutional explanation adequately tells us about the relationship between party and trade. There are specific demographics (e.g., white men without college degrees) among whom protectionist policies have become more popular and trade and globalization have become less popular (Uslaner 2000; Guisinger 2017), and over the past thirty years this demographic has voted for Republicans at higher and higher rates (Lupu and Carnes 2021). On the Democratic side, it is true that many elites have adopted pro-trade positions. But in recent years, partisanship increasingly appears to

have driven support for and opposition to trade. Gallup and other organizations have polled consistently on this and found that, while people's opinions on trade vary over time, there is a trend: Bill Clinton was elected, and there was a jump in Democratic support for foreign trade. During the Bush presidency, Republican support for trade remained steady while Democratic support for it declined. This flipped again during Obama's presidency, when Republican support for trade declined and more Democrats than Republicans supported it. During Trump's presidency, both Republican and Democratic support reached extremely high levels. And in the first year of the Biden administration, Democratic support remained at its exceptionally high level while Republican support collapsed.<sup>14</sup>

What to make of this? Clearly it is something more complicated than simply Democratic support for or Republican opposition to trade. After all, when foreign trade was more popular overall, it was equally popular relative to its earlier popularity with members of both parties; before 2021, the biggest gap is 17 points; in 2021, it was more than double that number at 35. Instead, it seems likely that what we are seeing is something more like Stimson's idea of *policy mood*, which posits that the whole public has a general preference for a set of policies at a given time (Erikson et al. 2002: 193). Over much of the past three decades, we do not seem to be witnessing a partisan trade trend at all; in fact, there was a rather remarkable alignment on trade, whether the consensus is that it was good or that it was bad, from 1994 to 2020. As Guisinger (2017) argues, public preferences on trade have in recent years not been divided up by political party or interest group membership, which has caused trade preferences to become increasingly unstable (Guisinger 2017). Essentially, people generally have not just taken partisan cues but have adopted their own stances on trade for reasons other than just party preferences. For

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<sup>14</sup> Gallup has new data on support for foreign trade (Jones 2022) that I would include here, but its chart only goes back to 2000. Democratic support for trade has leveled off further to 72%, Republicans remain at 44%.

decades, some citizens presumably supported foreign trade only when their preferred candidate was in power, but for many others, it was a more complex and unstable equation.

Over the past half-decade, though, we should understand Gallup's findings as a reflection of partisanship—though not necessarily of partisan attitudes toward trade itself. Republican support for foreign trade during the Trump administration is a more exaggerated reflection of the pattern we have already observed: Democrats support trade at higher rates when a Democrat is in power, and more Republicans support trade when a Republican is in power. What complicates the trend is the fact that Democratic support rose to record levels—but as the partisan divide for NAFTA support suggests, this was likely a Democratic response to Trump's rhetoric. Starting in 2015, Trump brought an isolationist, us-vs.-them attitude to the American political mainstream in a way no other modern political figure of his stature had; this prompted Democrats to dig in against his nationalism and protectionism, increasing their already rising support for internationalism and trade. This is where the idea of a broader Democratic embrace of trade is surely true: the party has since the early days of the Clinton Administration advocated for an activist role in the world and global economy (Uslaner 1994). Yet Republican support for foreign trade did not decline until Trump left office in 2021, when we see a swing.

What did Republican belief that foreign trade could be an economic opportunity actually mean under Trump? The short answer is, thanks largely to his continued attacks, that many people on the right grew increasingly critical of free trade policies. In 2015, 56% of Republicans believed that free trade agreements had been good for the country. But in the closing days of the 2016 presidential campaign, just 29% of Republicans agreed with the same statement (Jones 2017). The tariffs that Trump imposed were similarly popular among Republicans. A 2018 Pew poll found 58% of Republicans approved (with 26% disapproving) of increases in tariffs on

aluminum and steel (Jones 2018), and a 2021 Pew poll found 51% of Republican respondents agreeing with the statement that tariffs in general were a positive for the U.S., with just 25% calling them a negative (Silver et al. 2021). This suggests Republicans chose to follow Trump's lead in opposing the free trade policies that many of them had previously supported. As we can see from the 44% support Republicans showed for foreign trade in 2021 (Younis 2021), they have been following Trump's lead on trade with their support of protectionist policies, and many now have doubts about whether international trade can even benefit the United States if someone like Biden is in charge of it.

All this is not just to suggest that trade sentiment can be understood symbolically—that is, as really being about other issues, whether those issues are globalization or racism—the way I propose we understand NAFTA sentiment. Rising Democratic support for trade was a result of party members coalescing against isolationist rhetoric with which they disagreed; foreign trade is just one aspect of a generally internationalist worldview. On the Republican side, support for trade was elite-driven and was a product of the fact that Trump had vowed to rework trade deals so that America was no longer being ripped off. While resentment of the economic deals themselves was symbolic, their belief that he would tear them up and write better ones is a concrete hope about policy, even if many do not have a clear understanding of that policy.

Finally, while I have been selective about the polls chosen here, and though I discuss this further in the Appendix, I believe it is necessary to briefly discuss those polls I did not choose and their implications. Since less than a decade after NAFTA was implemented, polls have sometimes posed the question of whether NAFTA should be kept as it is, renegotiated, or even done away with completely. These studies invariably result in people claiming they would prefer NAFTA simply be renegotiated. In part, I believe this is a demonstration of actual public

dissatisfaction with NAFTA, but that this includes a dimension of people preferring a generic thing to the actual thing. That generic party members fare far differently from actual named people on ballots in elections is well documented (Cassino et al. 2014), and asking respondents whether they hope NAFTA is renegotiated allows them to map on whatever imagined changes they want to see. If, as both the qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests, those respondents know very little about NAFTA, saying that it should be renegotiated represents an out and allows them to provide a safe answer. All this means that while NAFTA renegotiation has been an element of popular discourse since not long after its creation, it is not necessarily meaningful that polls have found people claiming it should be renegotiated: in fact, it would be surprising if they found otherwise. All this suggests that the interest in renegotiation probably is elite-driven and that it does not represent a concrete understanding of the agreement. Research that compares the shifts in the percentage of unsure respondents to those who believe NAFTA should be renegotiated could be worthwhile.

### *A Symbolic Understanding of NAFTA*

To this point, I have examined NAFTA regionally, from an elite perspective, and through a range of public polling. In this section, I discuss the theoretical frameworks that I employed for these examinations of NAFTA, for its symbolic role, and for how the public views it. I already have introduced several of these ideas, namely Lippmann (1922), Zaller (1992), and Stimson (in Erikson et al. 2002). But there are others that I have not, like Bruter and Harrison (2020), Cramer (2016), and Oberhauser et al. (2019). This section will explore each of these ideas and provide additional context and ways to think about how the debate over NAFTA fit into larger questions about voter choice, economic resentment, and the role of economics in the 2016 election. In a

sense, this is a very brief literature review, but it is intended only to provide context for the ideas that I do apply rather than evaluating claims and accepting some while rejecting others.

Lippmann (1922), Zaller (1992), and Stimson (in Erikson et al. 2002) offer a framework for understanding public opinion toward NAFTA and toward free trade in general. Lippmann's classic work, appropriately titled *Public Opinion* (1922), offers an understanding of how the public processes information that assumes they are at least a step removed from the actual thing on which they are expressing an opinion. Instead, people occupy a world of "fictions" and "pseudo-environments" that they create to manage the size and complexity of the real world (10). In *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992), John R. Zaller provides a thorough explanation of how elite influence, question wording effects, and the "Accessibility" (48) of a policy research all affect how most voters receive and process information. The public, for Lippmann and Zaller, does not have a deep understanding of most policies, meaning they take cues from elites and make their decisions based on little actual knowledge. With this understanding of public opinion, policies like NAFTA can take on symbolic roles with ease. If public opinion is mostly a matter of what information reaches the public, surely a trade agreement that elites claim has a range of effects can take on wildly different meanings.

Stimson (in Erikson et al. 2002) uses *policy mood* to measure how liberal or how conservative the public is at a given moment, as determined by their feelings toward a set of issues, in this case, education, gun ownership, defense, and spending on cities. The public tracks similarly across these categories (197), suggesting that the shifts in public opinion seen in the Gallup polls on foreign trade are not too surprising. It is only recently, with the sharp decline in Republican support, that the trade poll has seen something truly inconsistent with *policy mood*.

Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison, in their book *Inside the Mind of a Voter: A New Approach to Electoral Psychology* (2020) offer a framework for understanding how voters approach elections that I believe is applicable here. Bruter and Harrison suggest an electoral psychology approach that foregrounds emotion and instinct in the thought process of the voter, and I believe this is quite useful to understanding NAFTA. This is particularly the case with symbolic discussions of the agreement, as they demonstrate how anger with globalization, elites, and Mexico might determine people's opinions on the agreement.

In March of 2016, it was growing inevitable that Donald Trump would indeed become the Republican presidential nominee. That same month, political scientist Katherine J. Cramer released a book titled *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. An ethnography that Cramer conducted of her home state between the mid-2000s and early 2010s, *The Politics of Resentment* argues social polarization between urban and rural residents has caused a sentiment among those in the second group that those in the first look down on them, and she concludes this has been a driving factor in Wisconsin's rising political polarization and rightward shift (Cramer 2016). If we accept Cramer's argument that her rural interlocutors have a deep resentment of those in cities, is important to understand how such a location-based identity could manifest itself when those rural residents are deciding whom to vote for—and how it could push them to oppose a policy like NAFTA, which we have established was especially controversial in the region she was studying, where it has been a particularly useful talking point for politicians.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Also relevant to this understanding are other studies that examine racism, resentment, and how culture and economics affect people's voting choices. These are works like David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991), Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (2004), and Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*, which also provide useful context when attempting to understand what else is going on with a large section of anti-NAFTA sentiment.



More recent studies suggest that the resentment identified by Cramer indeed played a role in 2016, but that factors other than economics were driving this—in other words, that economic resentment may have been symbolic, in the sense that it was really about something else. In a review of the results of the 2016 election titled “Political Moderation and Polarization in the Heartland: Economics, Rurality, and Social Identity in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” Ann M. Oberhauser, Daniel Krier, and Abdi M. Kusow (2019) conclude that race, not economics, was likely the most important factor for many voters. Using Iowa as a case study, they conduct a multivariate regression analysis of counties across the state and find that of the three categories they select—rurality, social identity, and economic distress—only the first two predicted whether a county would swing toward Trump relative to its support for Obama in 2012. This seems like it clearly is the same resentment that Cramer (2016) identifies, and both seem compatible with my conclusions that those on the right often had racial or nationalist motivations for criticizing the agreement. We can look across the nation, not just Iowa and Wisconsin, and apply this same reasoning to see that NAFTA criticism is about more than just economics. It has been this way since Perot and Buchanan attacked NAFTA: racism and anti-Mexico sentiment are important in determining how those on the right have felt about the agreement. This is all part of the same symbolic understanding of NAFTA that I hope this paper provides.

*Conclusion: What We Talk About When We Talk About NAFTA*

This paper is called “What We Talk About When We Talk About NAFTA,” and that is what I have done my best to pin down here. First, I reviewed the importance of region in the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement, concluding that the Rust Belt is the region where NAFTA plays the biggest role in the public imagination. Then, I examined an early

analysis of the NAFTA debate by Howard J. Wiarda (1994), updated it, and used it to study the rhetoric of four prominent NAFTA opponents early in the debate—activist Ralph Nader and former House Whip David Bonior (D-MI) on the left, and businessman Ross Perot and pundit and political pundit Pat Buchanan on the right—along with Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and President Donald Trump; I found that the ways people on the left and the ways people on the right talked about NAFTA were different and enduring. Both sides often raised economic concerns and took issue with the fact that the policy had such high levels of elite/corporate support, those on the left tended to raise concerns about the effects the agreement would have on the well-being of both Mexican and American workers, and those on the right tended to make more claims that were clearly motivated by racial or nationalist reasoning to make NAFTA a vehicle for symbolic racism. After this, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the debate over time and investigated how the public viewed NAFTA; I found that NAFTA quickly became a symbol to the general public, that this happened mainly because politicians on the left and the right criticized the agreement symbolically, that economists supported the agreement far more than most people, and that the divide between economists and the public probably has to do with the fact that the former group mostly sees NAFTA as policy while the latter sees it as a symbol.

In the next section, I moved from qualitative analysis to quantitative analysis, collecting and analyzing polls on NAFTA support from throughout the more than two decades it was in effect and using *relative support* to see that NAFTA was at its most popular before it became a symbol, that public opinion toward the agreement increased shortly before the House voted to pass it, and that it tracked with sentiment toward foreign trade until the early-mid 2010s. Foreign trade became more popular thanks to an increasing belief that the American economy was in good shape while NAFTA support remained neutral; the agreement became more popular after

the 2016 election, especially among Democrats, who likely instinctively viewed support for NAFTA as a way to signal disagreement with Trump. The combination of elite discourse and analysis of public opinion suggest that the public saw NAFTA as something more than just a trade agreement. So, I have provided some other ways of understanding why and how NAFTA became a symbol, some of which I touch on throughout the paper, like Lippmann (1922), Zaller (1992), and Stimson (in Erikson et al. 2002), but others that I felt were more logical only to include after the analysis of NAFTA, specifically Bruter and Harrison (2020), Cramer (2016), and Oberhauser et al. (2019). These frameworks for understanding NAFTA discourse also support the implications mentioned earlier, especially the fact that perception seems to be far more important than economic reality when it comes to trade agreements. Discourse surrounding them may be unusually driven by elite discourse due to their inaccessibility, the high level of expertise required to understand them, and their remove from the public. It also suggests that social resentment that manifested itself as economic anger over NAFTA may have to find a new outlet now that the agreement has been replaced.

So, in brief, what do we talk about when we talk about NAFTA? Depending on who is doing the talking, perhaps the answer is job loss. Or perhaps it is about some other aspect of globalization that has very little to do with NAFTA, like the foreign direct investment that started decades before NAFTA. Maybe it is Mexico, or the selling out of American interests to another country, particularly if the critic is on the right. The point is, what we talk about when we talk about NAFTA often depends on who we are, the argument we hope to make, and the elites from whom we have “learned” what NAFTA is, meaning there is no simple answer: it depends on the symbol of NAFTA that we have accepted. It is easier, though, to summarize what we do not talk about when we talk about NAFTA: and the answer to that question is NAFTA the policy.

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Month/Year</b>	<b>%Support</b>	<b>%Oppose</b>	<b>Absolute Difference</b>	<b>Relative Support</b>
Gallup	Mar-91	72	15	57	3.8
Gallup	Mar-91	72	20	52	2.6
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Sep-92	27	34	-7	-0.206
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Oct-92	21	36	-15	-0.416
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Jan-93	28	31	-3	-0.097
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Apr-93	27	25	2	0.08
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Jul-93	31	29	2	0.069
CBS-NYT	Aug-93	35	46	-11	-0.239
Time-CNN	Sep-93	41	42	-1	-0.024
CBS-NYT	Sep-93	33	40	-7	-0.175
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Sep-93	25	36	-11	-0.31
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Oct-93	29	33	-4	-0.121
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Nov-93	36	31	5	0.161
CBS-NYT	Nov-93	37	41	-4	-0.098
ABS	Nov-93	40	45	-5	-0.111
ABC	Nov-93	42	42	0	0
Time-CNN	Nov-93	41	39	2	0.051
La Times	Dec-93	42	27	15	0.556
Harris	Dec-93	51	41	10	0.244
CCFR-Gallup	Oct-94	50	31	19	0.613
Harris	Apr-95	48	39	9	0.231
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Mar-96	21	48	-27	-0.563
NORC	May-96	28	20	8	0.4
CBS	Oct-96	30	17	13	0.765
NBC/WSJ	Apr-97	28	43	-15	-0.35
NBC/WSJ	Jul-97	32	42	-10	-0.238
Gallup	Aug-97	37	47	-10	-0.213
Business Week-Harris	Sep-97	42	36	6	0.167
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Sep-97	23	29	-6	-0.207
LA Times	Sep-97	39	39	0	0
Pew	Sep-97	47	30	17	0.567
Zogby	Sep-97	45	30	15	0.5
Pew	Nov-97	45	34	11	0.324
Harris	Apr-99	39	35	4	0.114
PIPA	Oct-99	44	30	14	0.467
Gallup	May-00	47	39	8	0.205

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Month/Year</b>	<b>%Support</b>	<b>%Oppose</b>	<b>Absolute Difference</b>	<b>Relative Support</b>
Pew	Sep-01	49	29	20	0.69
Ipsos	Nov-02	48	37	11	0.297
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Sep-03	18	35	-17	-0.486
Pew	Dec-03	34	33	1	0.03
Gallup	Jan-04	38	46	-8	-0.174
Newsweek-Princeton	Feb-04	28	35	-7	-0.2
Pew	Jul-04	47	34	13	0.382
CCGA	Jul-04	42	43	-1	-0.023
International Trade	Jun-05	46	40	6	0.15
Pew	Nov-05	44	34	10	0.294
Pew	Dec-06	44	35	9	0.257
Pew	Nov-07	40	40	0	0
Pew	Apr-08	35	48	-13	-0.271
CCGA	Jul-08	42	55	-13	-0.236
Gallup	Nov-08	37	58	-21	-0.362
Pew	Apr-09	44	35	9	0.257
Pew	Nov-09	43	32	11	0.344
Pew	Oct-10	35	44	-9	-0.205
CCGA	Apr-13	52	48	4	0.083
NBC- <i>WSJ</i>	Apr-15	29	26	3	0.115
CBS-NYT	May-15	22	18	4	0.222
Monmouth	Oct-15	18	24	-6	-0.25
Bloomberg	Mar-16	29	44	-15	-0.341
Gallup	Feb-17	48	46	2	0.043
Pew	Mar-17	51	39	12	0.308
CCGA	Jul-17	54	40	14	0.35
Bloomberg	Jul-17	41	37	4	0.108
CBS	Aug-17	40	39	1	0.026
Pew	Oct-17	56	33	23	0.697
Ipsos	Oct-17	58	22	36	1.636
CCGA	Jul-18	63	32	31	0.969
NYT	Sep-18	59	28	31	1.107
Fox	Dec-18	41	34	7	0.206

These polls all come from the Roper Center website, from one of the sources mentioned in the bibliography, or from the website of the polling organization itself. I have cross-checked the polls that I first found in the books on NAFTA with the Roper Center database, and many can be found there, too.

### *Appendix*

Polling data on NAFTA has been relatively consistent, aside from a relative gap between late 2010 and early 2015; presumably NAFTA seemed like a less relevant issue during this period, yet it would have been extremely useful to know whether public opinion was shifting in the years before Trump announced his campaign. I believe this list is both more comprehensive and more accurate than others I have encountered: other collections of data are a) outdated and worth updating with polling from the past decade and/or b) not exacting enough in choosing which polls to include in the first place. Here, I have collected every poll I have found that asks respondents some variation of the following questions: a) “Do you support NAFTA?” b) “Do you believe NAFTA benefits the United States?” and c) “Do you believe NAFTA has been good for the U.S./the U.S. economy?” There may be some ambiguity over whether these last two categories signify 1:1 support for NAFTA, but it seems implausible that anyone who does not support NAFTA would claim that it benefits the United States, and I believe these can be coded as similar questions. However, there are many polls related to NAFTA that I felt did not accurately reflect public sentiment toward the agreement.

I did not include polls that...

- Measured the beliefs of a specific group of the general population (e.g., asking only Hispanic respondents whether they support NAFTA, or asking only respondents who had been following the news whether they believe it benefits the U.S.)
- Asked respondents shortly after NAFTA was enacted whether the trade agreement had affected them positively or negatively
- Asked whether the United States should remain in NAFTA, as these often include a confounding option of allowing respondents to say NAFTA should be changed in some way but should not be done away with altogether
- Asked respondents the extent to which NAFTA benefited the United States rather than simply asking whether America benefits, as these led to outsize numbers of respondents saying that the U.S. had benefited somewhat from the agreement
- Attempted to measure opinion on how respondents believed NAFTA affected a variety of things (e.g., how NAFTA had affected them, how NAFTA had affected workers, whether NAFTA had cost America jobs)

Finally, there is one other set of polling worth mentioning. A 2017 Pew report identifies 2005 as “the last time Pew Research Center and Gallup regularly polled about the agreement” (Stokes 2017), a claim that seems strange considering the phrasing of an annual question asked starting in the mid-2000s about whether “free trade agreements such as NAFTA” are good or bad for the United States (Rosentiel 2010). To ask a respondent what they think of “agreements such as NAFTA” seems unlikely to produce a response very different from asking a respondent what they think of NAFTA itself. Others agree: a 2008 set of polling on NAFTA compiled by the American Enterprise Institute in 2008, for example, includes the Pew polls in its list (though it also includes some polls that I have not included here). Though it would be ideal for these Pew polls to ask about NAFTA specifically rather than agreements like NAFTA, I believe the phrasing is close enough to generate similar responses. Even if the pollsters’ intentions really were just to measure public opinion on free trade agreements, it seems unavoidable that the responses would be hard to separate from public opinion on NAFTA.

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