

**COVID, ELITE RHETORIC, AND AMERICANS' ATTITUDES
TOWARD U.S. TRADE PRACTICES WITH CHINA**

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Abstract

Objectives: In this paper we consider how the COVID-19 pandemic and evaluations of Donald Trump combined to influence Americans' attitudes toward U.S. trade practices with China. We suggest that psychological factors—such as confirmation bias and transfer of grievances—influence how individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of trade. Specifically, we argue that the severity of the pandemic (reflected by both cumulative deaths and news coverage of the pandemic) and the rhetoric of (then) President Trump came together to influence Americans' attitudes toward trade with China.

Methods: To assess the COVID effect, the Trump effect, and their interaction effect on trade opinion, we merge data from 39 waves of the weekly Nationscape surveys, conducted from October 2019 to July 2020 (N = 62,171), with data on weekly COVID coverage for nine national news sources and cumulative state-level weekly data on COVID-related deaths. We estimate our models using hierarchical ordered logit.

Results: Our findings suggest that COVID related news coverage, cumulative COVID deaths, and Americans' favorability toward Donald Trump have strong positive effects on Americans' support for trade tariffs on Chinese imports. Further, we find that the effects of COVID deaths on attitudes toward China tariffs are moderated by Trump favorability, with the effect of COVID deaths significantly stronger among Trump favorables.

Conclusion: The Covid pandemic and evaluations of Donald Trump worked both independently and together to shape Americans' attitudes toward China tariffs.

Key Words: Trade attitudes; China trade; Covid-19 pandemic; transfer of grievances; confirmation bias

Word count: 7,644

During his 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent presidential administration, Donald Trump staked out a strong oppositional position on international trade that contradicted the traditional Republican stance of supporting expanded trade and international free markets. Trump harshly criticized free trade and repeatedly stressed the negative effects of trade on key components of the American economy in his campaigns. In particular, Trump focused on the negative impacts of trade for Americans who work in vulnerable economic sectors, tapping into economic anxieties relating to international trade. Trump directed particularly sharp rhetoric toward China and other economic rivals, and he called for increased tariffs as a mechanism for reducing the American trade deficit to protect American jobs. Indeed, in 2018 Trump imposed tariffs on goods and products imported from China, resulting in reciprocal retaliation. Even though the two countries reached a preliminary “Phase One” trade deal in 2020, most of the tariffs were retained by the Biden administration.

In the later years of the Trump administration, the intensified elite rhetoric against China trade coincided with a major pandemic that originated in China, and President Trump used sharp rhetoric to connect China with the COVID pandemic. This coincidence of anti-China trade rhetoric and a pandemic that originated in China raises an interesting question: did the COVID pandemic have an effect on Americans’ attitudes toward trade with China? We posit that the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced how Americans think about China trade (including tariffs on Chinese goods), and this effect may have been magnified among Americans with favorable views toward President Trump. In this paper we explore how COVID-19 (both the severity and news coverage of COVID-19) and support for Donald Trump combined to influence their attitudes toward U.S. trade practices with China.

When it comes to Americans’ attitudes toward trade with China, we argue that there are two distinct effects: the Trump effect and the COVID-19 effect. First, because former President Donald Trump repeatedly attacked Chinese trade practices and initiated a full-scale trade war with China, we suggest that Donald Trump has had a negative effect on how Americans view U.S. trade with China.

Moreover, we contend that, due to its Chinese origins, the COVID-19 pandemic likely further exacerbated Americans' attitudes toward trade with China. After the spread of COVID-19 to the United States, Trump repeatedly engaged in xenophobic outbursts, referring to COVID-19 as the "China Virus" and the "Wuhan Virus" and directly blaming China for the dire consequences of the pandemic. We contend that both the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and news coverage of the pandemic also affected how Americans think about trade with China. These two effects—i.e., the Trump effect and the COVID effect—reinforced each other to form an interaction effect, with Americans' attitudes toward Trump moderating the effects of the COVID pandemic on their support for tariffs on Chinese goods. This interaction effect, we argue, is a result of psychological processes of *confirmation bias* and what we refer to as "*transfer of grievances*".

Research on confirmation bias reveals that individuals selectively absorb information that aligns with their political views and ignore conflicting information (Lerman and Acland 2020; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schweider and Rich 2000; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006). This is evident among Trump supporters during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, Trump supporters were already opposed to trade with China, influenced by Trump's consistent criticism of China's trade practices and its impact on the US manufacturing industry (Essig, Xu, Garand, and Keser 2020; Keser, Garand, Xu, and Essig 2023). We propose that exposure to negative information about the pandemic, including Trump's anti-China rhetoric, further decreased support for trade with China among Trump supporters. Additionally, we introduce the concept of *transfer of grievances*, which suggests that negative news about one issue can heighten individuals' grievances about another issue. Trump's anti-China trade stance and COVID-19 rhetoric likely combined to increase opposition to trade with China among his supporters.

To explore the effects of Trump attitudes and COVID related factors on China trade attitudes, we use data from the Nationscape surveys, a series of 50 weekly rolling cross-sectional surveys that include

questions on attitudes toward tariffs against China and evaluations of Trump. To gauge the effects of COVID and Trump on China trade attitudes, we merge the Nationscape survey data with two macro-level variables related to the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) the weekly state-level cumulative COVID deaths per 100K population, and (2) weekly national news coverage on COVID-19. Our findings suggest that COVID related news coverage, cumulative COVID deaths, and Americans' favorability toward Donald Trump have strong positive effects on Americans' support for trade tariffs on Chinese imports. Further, we find that the effects of COVID deaths on attitudes toward China tariffs are moderated by Trump favorability, with the effect of COVID deaths significantly stronger among Trump favorables.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON TRADE ATTITUDES

Previous research has offered two categories of explanations for public attitudes toward free trade: (1) factors rooted in economic self-interest and (2) non-economic factors rooted in political psychology. First, researchers have attributed a great deal of variance in trade opinion to economic distributional consequences associated with certain sectors of the economy (Stolper and Samuelson 1941; Balistreri 1997; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; O'Rourke and Sinnott 2001). Based on the Heckscher-Ohlin theory, countries can be divided into two categories: skill-abundant and skill-scarce. In an environment of open trade, skill-abundant countries will export goods and products intensive of high skill but import goods and products intensive of cheap labor (Heckscher 1919). In these countries, free trade will increase the demand for and raise the relative wages of high-skill workers but decrease the demand for and lower the relative wages of low-skill workers. As a result, high-skill workers will benefit from open trade, but low-skill workers will lose from it (Stolper and Samuelson 1941). The major implication of the Heckscher-Ohlin theory on trade opinion is that in skill-abundant countries like the United States, high-skill workers are more likely to support free trade, but their low-skill counterparts are more likely to oppose it.

Numerous studies have found empirical support for the Heckscher-Olin theory on trade opinion in the U.S., Canada, Latin America, as well as in a cross-national context (Balistreri 1997; O'Rourke and

Sinnott 2001; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Baker 2003; Mayda and Rodrik 2005). Prior scholarship also has linked economic variables such as the unemployment rate and type of employment sector to public opinion toward international trade. For example, scholars have found that Americans residing in districts with high unemployment caused by international outsourcing are less likely to support international free trade agreements (Lukinovich, Nurullayev, and Garand 2020).

Trade opinion can also be influenced by non-economic factors such as ethnocentrism, nationalism, partisanship, elite rhetoric, concerns over the social and cultural consequences of trade, and individual attitudes towards competition (Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Margalit 2012; Mayda and Rodrik 2005; O'Rourke and Sinnott 2001; Mutz and Kim 2017; Mutz and Lee 2020; Ballard-Rosa, Goldstein, and Rudra, 2023). For instance, Mansfield and Mutz (2009) find that individuals' educational attainment is a strong predictor of trade opinion, since individuals' education levels could reflect their level of anxiety from out-group threats such as nationalism, isolationism, and ethnocentrism. Mansfield and Mutz conclude that those with higher levels of tolerance of out-groups and with more cosmopolitan worldviews will likely support free trade, but those holding ethnocentric, nationalist, and isolationist views will likely oppose free trade. Mutz, Mansfield, and Kim (2020) have explored the "racialization of international trade" and found that individuals' racial identity plays a significant role in their levels of support for trade; furthermore, the predominant racial make-up of the trading partner country influences how individuals view the advantages and disadvantages of trading with that country.

Building on this body of research, scholars contend that individuals' trade attitudes can be influenced by concerns over the impact of trade on communities and the nation as a whole; for instance, individuals could have concerns about increased foreign influence, westernization, and the loss of traditional moral codes and therefore oppose international trade (Margalit 2012; Mutz and Kim 2017). Additionally, more recent work, using experiment survey data from China, Japan, and South Korea, has demonstrated that public support for protectionist policies is dependent on the identity of

the target state (Kim, Park, Rhee, and Yang 2023). Specifically, individuals base their support for tariffs and other protectionist measures on their perceptions and evaluations of a specific state. Mutz (2017) associates' partisanship and political ideology with changes of Americans' trade attitudes. According to Mutz, conservatives and Republicans have been more negative about trade since as early as 2012 even though the Republican party has historically been referred to as the party of free trade.

Another important non-economic factor is the influence of elite discourse and rhetoric, although only a few studies have explored the effects of political elites and framing on trade opinion. Hiscox (2006) argues that framing and endorsement could influence trade opinion, and Essig et al. (2020) and Keser et al. (2023) more explicitly argue that intensified elite rhetoric on trade issues could cause the public to update their trade attitudes and could influence trade attitudes for individuals on both sides of the partisan spectrum. Finally, Ballard-Rosa, Goldstein, and Rudra (2023) argue that elite rhetoric related to unfair trade practices and American meritocratic values have driven the politization of trade attitudes.

THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

Building on previous literature, we connect prior scholarship on trade and political psychology by proposing two distinct—but interconnected—factors that explain Americans' attitudes toward trade with China.

The Effect of Elite Rhetoric on Trade Opinion with China

Public opinion scholars have long explored the influence of political elites on citizens' policy preferences (Zaller 1992; Jacoby 1988; Cohen 2003; Johnston 2006; Lenz 2013; Broockman and Butler 2017; Gabel and Scheve 2007). Recently, a few studies have focused attention on the effects of elite rhetoric, framing, and endorsement on trade opinion (Hiscox 2006; Essig et al. 2020; Dür and Schlipphak 2020; Keser et al. 2023). Essig et al. (2020) use the 2016 presidential election period as an example to illustrate a "Trump effect" on trade attitudes, and they show that this effect goes beyond partisanship

and could influence trade attitudes for both Republicans and Democrats. One reason for this, they contend, is that Trump engaged in extensive trade-related attacks against China for an extended period. Trump persistently asserted that certain trade partners like China are the culprits behind the decline of certain industries in the U.S. and that the U.S. has been taken advantage of by China. Essig et al. (2020) and Keser et al. (2023) contends that Trump's consistent attacks against trade practices with China has led Trump supporters to lower their support for expanded trade and Trump opponents actually to increase their support for expanded trade. Further, the targets of proposed or potential protectionist policies are relevant to individuals' views these policies (Kim, et al.).

We contend that Trump's attacks on trade policies and trade practices with China not only affect general opinion on trade as shown by Essig et al. (2020) and Keser et al. (2023), but more importantly they directly diminish Americans' support for trade with China. Trump's attacks were primarily focused on China, and the trade war primarily targeted China. Additionally, Trump characterized U.S. trade practices with China as "unfair" towards the United States and disproportionately benefiting China. As Mutz and Kim (2017) have demonstrated, individuals value in-group well-being more than they value out-group well-being and are more likely to support international trade if it benefits the in-group and harms the out-group. Put differently, individuals prefer it when trade creates a relative advantage for their country over their trade rivals. Trump's rhetoric framed trade with China as disproportionately advantaging China and hurting the U.S., and we suggest that those who support Trump will likely lower their support for trade with China due to this rhetoric. Further, Trump's general election rival Joe Biden did not explicitly support trade with China and did not engage in any significant rhetoric to contradict Trump's positions on U.S. trade with China. Subsequently, we should expect that Trump supporters would be more likely to support trade restrictions on China imports.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with more favorable views toward Donald Trump are more likely to support increased trade tariffs on Chinese goods compared to individuals with less favorable views toward Trump.

The COVID Effect on Trade Opinion with China

In early 2020, the COVID-19 virus broke out in Wuhan, China and quickly spread throughout the world. In response, national governments took major steps to address the negative consequences of the pandemic, including limits on access to public places, travel restrictions, vaccination and masking requirements, and various forms of lockdowns and stay-at-home mandates. The U.S. economy took a big hit, and the pandemic resulted in business closings, extensive job losses, decreased economic growth, major stock market losses, and supply chain disruptions. The social cost of the pandemic was also considerable, including disruptions in educational activities (and subsequent reductions in student learning and academic performance), widespread social isolation, and a major increase in mental health issues, including increased anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (National Institutes of Health 2023). Only with the passage of time will these pandemic costs be fully realized and calculated.

Because COVID-19 originated in China and the pandemic was commonly associated with China, we suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic could have a negative effect on Americans' attitudes toward trade relations with China. Americans can easily connect COVID-19 with China and even transfer their frustration with COVID to resentment or even hostility toward China. In this process, a few COVID-related factors can play important roles in shaping attitudes toward China trade. First, COVID-19 has caused a large number of casualties, unprecedented economic costs, and disruptions of social life, all of which have resulted in some level of resentment and hostility against China among Americans. It is reasonable to speculate that the more casualties there are in individuals' immediate context, the more resentment/hostility they will have against China (including trade with China).

Second, mass media reports have typically connected COVID-19 with China, and such media coverage will likely influence Americans' attitudes toward trade relations with China. In the initial stages of the pandemic, mass media have constantly connected COVID-19 with China because the virus was first discovered in China, and the spread of the virus was arguably due to China's handling of the virus and its failure to share information transparently. Reading or hearing about COVID-19 and China in media content will likely lower individuals' evaluations of China and decrease their support for trade with China.

Based on these arguments, we develop a second set of hypotheses to establish the relationship between COVID-19 and China trade attitudes. We focus on the effects of two aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public opinion toward China trade: (1) the total number of COVID deaths in individuals' home contexts, and (2) national media coverage on COVID-19:

Hypothesis 2: The rise in COVID-related deaths in individuals' context is expected to have a positive effect on Americans' support for increased tariffs on Chinese goods.

Hypothesis 3: Increases in news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have a positive effect on Americans' support for increased tariffs on Chinese goods.

Interaction Effects of Trump and COVID-19: Confirmation Bias and Grievance Transfer

While Donald Trump and COVID-19 could both have a direct influence Americans' attitudes toward China trade, they may also work together to affect trade attitudes. We argue that these two factors—Donald Trump and COVID-19—have an interaction effect through the psychological processes of *confirmation bias* and *transfer of grievances*.

Scholarly research on confirmation bias highlights how individuals engage in politics by selectively absorbing information that aligns with their preexisting political views and disregarding information that clashes with their political positions (Lerman and Acland 2020; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schweider and Rich 2000; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006). This

phenomenon can be observed among Trump supporters during the COVID pandemic. Trump supporters were preconditioned to oppose trade with China even before the COVID pandemic, and it is likely that the imposition of a COVID health crisis originating in China reinforced and magnified that anti-China positions that characterized many Trump supporters. During his presidential campaign and while he was in office, former President Donald Trump consistently lashed China on its unfair trade practices and blamed China for the loss of the U.S. manufacturing industry. Essig et al. (2020) and Ceser et al. (2023) show that Trump's anti-trade rhetoric has affected Americans' trade opinions and that Trump supporters are much more likely to oppose expanded trade. Since his anti-trade rhetoric was focused on China, we contend that Trump supporters will be more likely to oppose trade with China.

Moreover, after a series of mistakes and failures by China in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 President Donald Trump quickly turned to China as a scapegoat. He consistently criticized China for spreading the virus and blamed China for the deadly outcomes of the COVID-19 outbreak. In almost all his communication to the public, he referred to the COVID-19 virus as the "China virus", "China plague", "Wuhan virus," or even the pejorative "Kung Flu." That President Trump linked the COVID pandemic to China—and did so in incendiary language—is clear.

We suggest that Trump supporters will likely further decrease their support for trade with China when exposed to negative information about the pandemic, including the anti-China rhetoric that was prevalent during the pandemic period. Resentment and hostility toward China among Trump supporters will likely be magnified by the two layers of anti-China messages delivered by Trump. Among the American public, Trump supporters will be the group that is most likely to absorb both messages (i.e., anti-trade messages targeting China and anti-China rhetoric related to COVID). In other words, Trump supporters were heavily predisposed to anti-China trade rhetoric in the first place, and Trump's anti-China rhetoric regarding COVID-19 likely exacerbated this effect. In essence, exposure to negative

information about China's involvement in the COVID pandemic *confirmed* and then *reinforced* existing negative sentiments about China and trade held by Trump supporters.

To further strengthen our argument, we propose another theoretical line of reasoning: *transfer of grievances*, which is the psychological process whereby news coverage on one issue heightens individuals' sense of grievance on a separate highly-salient issue. This psychological process is somewhat different from the process of *confirmation bias*. The confirmation bias theory contends that individuals will be receptive to either negative or positive information regarding an issue or actor based on whether this information confirms their prior beliefs. In slight contrast, the grievance transfer theory contends that individuals are generally preoccupied with the issue of greatest personal salience, and any new negative information that can be attributed to the same actor that caused their original grievance (no matter how tenuous the connection) will be used to exacerbate their sense of grievance on the original issue. For instance, individuals' disapproval of a politician's performance will be further aggravated by any negative news related to the politician even if the additional news is not directly relevant to the political performance of the politician. If individuals disapprove of a president's performance of managing the economy, seeing news about a scandal involving the president may increase individuals' disapproval of the president's performance on the economy, even though the scandal has little to do with economic performance. Here, instead of being simply predisposed to believe the new negative information, as suggested by confirmation bias theory, voters transfer their frustration (grievance) from the newly exposed issue toward the issue of greater salience, in this case the economy. Similarly, the conditions associated with transfer of grievance are found in the coincidence of Trump's hostility to China trade and a COVID pandemic that could be linked to China. The psychological processes associated with transfer of grievance serve as a binding mechanism that allows the conditions precipitated by the COVID pandemic to influence Americans' views towards an entirely separate issue area: China trade.

A leader's rhetoric can significantly shape how Americans perceive international trade in general, as well as trade with specific nations. Negative rhetoric from elites can influence public opinion, often reflecting partisan identification and political knowledge (Alley, 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2021; Guisinger & Saunders, 2017). Our theory builds on existing scholarship related to elite cueing. Previous research has shown that individuals are likely to accept new information from trusted sources and are more inclined to embrace information that aligns with their preexisting views. Zaller (1992) demonstrates that people's existing views and predispositions shape how they perceive political messages from elites. However, it has also been shown that during periods of significant news coverage, individuals can and do update their policy preferences in line with their existing predispositions and the messages they receive from trusted politicians or elites (Dancey and Goren, 2010).

There are different types of Trump supporters, including nationalists, anti-elitists, those who consider themselves "left behind" and those who perceive "status threat" from increased diversity or globalization. These different types of Trump supporters share one thing in common: they all tend to have pre-existing anti-globalization predispositions (Blum and Parker, 2019; Knowles and Tropp, 2018; 2018; Mutz, 2018). In other words, these supporters were already inclined to oppose globalization and free and expanded trade. Consistent with our transfer of grievances argument, Bearce and Scott (2019) show that individuals tend to lump issue areas together when they share international connotations. In our case, they might conflate international trade with issues related to international human flows, such as immigration and pandemics.

The above arguments point to the argument that COVID-19 may exacerbate anti-China trade opinions among Trump supporters. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Favorability toward Donald Trump moderates the relationship between COVID deaths and news coverage, on one hand, and support for increased tariffs on Chinese goods, on the other.

Specifically, the relationship between COVID variables and support for tariffs on Chinese goods should be stronger among individuals with favorable attitudes toward Donald Trump.

DATA AND METHODS

In the preceding section we offer detailed theoretical arguments for how Americans' attitudes toward China trade is influenced by the severity of COVID-19, news coverage of the pandemic, and support for Donald Trump. Given our interest in isolating the effects of the COVID pandemic on Americans' attitudes toward tariffs on Chinese goods, it is important to have survey data on how Americans think about trade with China collected both before the start of the COVID pandemic and during the pandemic. Moreover, it would be useful to have data on the intensity of the pandemic (as measured by COVID deaths) as well as data on the magnitude of news coverage of the COVID pandemic.

To consider the effects of the COVID pandemic on Americans' attitudes toward China trade tariffs, we draw on data from three sources. First, we use survey data from the Nationscape surveys, a series of rolling cross-sectional surveys sponsored by the Democracy Fund (Tausanovich and Vavreck, 2020). We use data from the first two data releases of the Nationscape surveys, which include 50 weekly surveys of approximately 6,300 survey respondents each week conducted from July 2019 to July 2020. The two releases include approximately 318,000 survey respondents. Many of the survey questions are repeated across all or most of the 50 weeks of surveys, and this means that we can link individuals' survey responses to the weekly media and weekly state COVID pandemic contexts in which they reside. Second, to measure the weekly state COVID pandemic context, we collect and merge with the Nationscape data aggregate-level data from a variety of public sources on the weekly and cumulative totals of COVID cases and deaths for each state. Third, to capture the national news context relating to the COVID pandemic, we collect data on the number of news stories each week relating to the COVID pandemic for nine national news sources.

Using these data, we model individuals' attitudes toward China tariffs as a function of weekly national news coverage of the COVID pandemic, state cumulative COVID deaths per 100k population,

favorability toward Donald Trump, and a range of control variables, including partisan identification, political ideology, measures of economic vulnerability, and socioeconomic and demographic attributes. We also consider possible interaction effects that represent how Trump favorability moderates the relationship between COVID pandemic variables and Americans' attitudes toward China tariffs.

Dependent Variables

The Nationscape surveys ask respondents about their attitudes toward trade tariffs on Chinese goods from Wave 12 (October 10-16, 2019) to Wave 50 (June 25 - July 1, 2020). The Chinese tariffs question was one of a group of five questions randomly assigned to a subset of survey respondents each week, with the sample sizes for these questions averaging approximately 2000 respondents per week. For this study, our key dependent variable is support for the imposition of tariffs on Chinese goods, which is measured on a three -point scale ranging from 0 (disagree) to 2 (agree). This variable can be interpreted as carrying a negative valence toward China, since tariffs on Chinese goods would be seen as having a negative effect on the Chinese economy.

Independent Variables

Weekly state COVID deaths. We use data from the COVID Tracking Project to measure for each state and each week the cumulative number of COVID deaths (Atlantic Monthly 2021). We use state population data to convert this variable into the number of cumulative deaths per 100,000 population. We suggest that this variable provides a good sense of the seriousness of the pandemic for each state at a given time. We merge these state-week data with the Nationscape survey data so that we can conduct individual-level analyses. We expect that individuals situated in state-week contexts characterized by high levels of cumulative COVID deaths will perceive the pandemic as being more serious and will subsequently be more supportive of tariffs on Chinese goods, with all else equal.

National news coverage. We suggest that media coverage of the COVID pandemic captures well the intensity of the pandemic. Individuals are most likely to obtain information about the magnitude of the

pandemic at the national level from national news media sources, and hence we contend that a measure of national news media coverage of the COVID pandemic is a strong indicator of the seriousness of the pandemic. Individuals are also most likely to be exposed to political rhetoric about the Chinese source of the pandemic (e.g., “China flu,” “Wuhan flu”) from national news media sources. Hence, we expect that national news coverage of the COVID pandemic will be positively related to support for tariffs on Chinese goods.

In order to measure this variable, we use Lexis-Nexis data to conduct a search for the following combinations of keywords: (1) “Coronavirus” or “COVID”; (2) “Coronavirus” or “COVID,” accompanied by “Trump”; (3) “Chinese Virus” or “China Virus” or “Wuhan Virus”; and (4) “Chinese Virus” or “China Virus” or “Wuhan Virus,” accompanied by “Trump.” We conducted this search for each week for which Nationscape data are available and for each of the following nine news sources: CNN, MS-NBC, Fox News, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, National Public Radio (NPR), NBC, ABC, and CBS. Hence, we have a count of each of the four combinations of keywords for each of the nine news sources and for each week in the Nationscape dataset. We focus our attention here on general references to the Coronavirus and COVID. We note that the trends in media references to “Coronavirus” and “COVID” are highly correlated among media sources, so we conduct a principal components analysis of these nine media variables; not unsurprisingly, we find a strong single factor that accounts for the covariance among these media variables (eigenvalue = 8.58, variance explained = 0.953). We use a factor score derived from this principal components analysis as the primary media independent variable in our analyses.

Trump favorability. We estimate the direct effects of favorability toward Donald Trump, measured on a scale ranging from 0 (very unfavorable) to 3 (very favorable). We posit that Trump favorables will be more likely to support tariffs on Chinese goods. We also consider the moderating effects of support for President Trump on the relationship between COVID news coverage and cumulative COVID deaths, on one hand, and support for China tariffs; we expect that the relationships between these two COVID

variables and support for China tariffs will be stronger among Trump supporters than among Trump opponents. We consider these effects with a pair of interactions for our two COVID variables and our Trump favorability variable.

Control variables. We include in our models several control variables, including partisan identification, political ideology, economic evaluations, employment status, union membership, education, household income, nativity, gender, race and ethnicity, age, and variables representing trends in attitudes toward China tariffs in the pre-COVID period. For the sake of brevity, these variables are described in Appendix 1.

Model Estimation

For our individual-level analyses, the dependent variable—support for tariffs on Chinese goods—is an orderable discrete (ordinal) variable, so we estimate our models using ordered logit. However, because we include contextual variables representing *weekly* media COVID coverage and *weekly state* data on COVID deaths, our data are clustered; simply, survey respondents are nested in both weeks and states, so all respondents within weeks have the same values of national media COVID coverage and all respondents within specific states and weeks have the same values on the cumulative and new COVID deaths variables. Subsequently, we estimate our models using multi-level (hierarchical) ordered logit with random intercepts for state and year.¹

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

What can we say about the effects of the COVID pandemic on Americans' support for tariffs on Chinese goods? We begin with Figure 1, in which we present the trend in the percentages of Americans who express support for and opposition to tariffs on China goods from Wave 12 (October 3-9, 2019) to Wave 50 (June 25 – July 1, 2020); we include a reference line for Wave 23 (December 12-19, 2019) to divide the pre- and post-COVID periods. As one can see, prior to the introduction of COVID, Americans' level of support for China tariffs was at a relatively low level. On the other hand, once COVID came to

¹ We consider the possibility of multicollinearity among independent variables but find that Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) are all well within acceptable limits.

the attention of the world community and began to spread, there was a strong upward shift in Americans' support for China tariffs (and a commensurate downward shift in Americans' opposition to China tariffs), starting during Wave 30 (February 6-12, 2020). The upward trend continued to Wave 46 (May 28 – June 3, 2020), at which point it levelled off for the remainder of the time frame under study. The upward shift in Americans' support for tariffs on Chinese goods coincided with the intensification of the COVID pandemic and provides circumstantial evidence that at least some Americans responded to the China-origin pandemic by increasing their level of support for China tariffs.

In Table 1 we present hierarchical ordered logit estimates for two models. The first model considers the direct effects of COVID news coverage, cumulative COVID deaths, and Trump favorability, while the second model considers how the effects of these two COVID variables are moderated by individuals' favorability toward Donald Trump.² Turning first to Model (1), we find substantial transfer of grievance effects, with the intensity of the COVID pandemic—represented by both COVID news coverage and cumulative deaths—having a strong positive effect on Americans' support for China tariffs. Turning first to COVID news coverage, we find a strong and statistically-significant positive effect of this variable ($b = 0.146$, $z = 12.76$), suggesting that as news coverage of the COVID pandemic heated up Americans moved toward support of a more punitive policy relating to China trade. In Appendix Figure A1 we show how COVID news coverage affected the predicted probabilities of supporting and opposing tariffs on Chinese goods. Moving from the lowest to the highest value on the COVID news coverage variable, and controlling for the effects of other independent variables in the model, we find that support for tariffs on Chinese goods increased from 0.389 to 0.484—i.e., an increase of 0.095 across the range of this independent variable. Simply, approximately 10% of Americans became supportive of China tariffs as news coverage of the COVID pandemic reached its peak. This is not a huge increase, to be sure, but it is

² The results in Table 1 are from the full sample, representing respondents for Waves 12-50. As a robustness check, in Appendix 2 we reestimate our models using only the sample of respondents from the post-COVID pandemic period. As one can readily see, the inferences drawn from these results are the same for the total and post-COVID samples.

sufficiently large to suggest that COVID news coverage nudged a significant number of Americans in the direction of supporting tariffs on Chinese goods. These results provide support for Hypothesis 3.

We can also estimate the effects of cumulative COVID deaths per 100K population on support for China tariffs, and here again we find a positive effect that is statistically distinguishable from 0 ($b = 0.002$, $z = 5.23$). As the cumulative number of COVID deaths increased, Americans become significantly more sympathetic to a trade policy that includes tariffs on Chinese goods. In Appendix Figure A2 we present predicted probabilities associated with different values of the independent variable, controlling for the effects of other independent variables in the model. As we move from no COVID deaths to the maximum number of COVID deaths per 100K population, we see that there is an increase of 0.080 (i.e., from 0.417 to 0.497) in support for China tariffs. While this is a modest increase, it suggests that the COVID pandemic may have moved a discernible proportion of Americans in the direction of supporting tariffs on Chinese goods. Here again, these results provide support for Hypothesis 2.

We also find that Trump favorability is a major driver of Americans' attitudes toward China tariffs ($b = 0.366$, $z = 39.41$), as suggested by Hypothesis 1. Simply, individuals who have strong favorable views toward Donald Trump are considerably more likely to support tariffs on Chinese goods than those with unfavorable views. In Appendix Figure A3 we present predicted probabilities associated with different values of Trump favorability. As one can see, as Americans move from the lowest to highest value on this variable there is an increase in the probability of support for China tariffs of 0.263 (from 0.312 to 0.575). Clearly, Trump favorability has a strong positive effect on support for China tariffs.³

The effects of most of our control variables are consistent with expectations. We find that partisan identification ($b = 0.057$, $z = 11.05$) and political ideology ($b = 0.128$, $z = 14.85$) have positive effects on

³ One possibility to consider is that the relationship between Trump evaluations and support for China tariffs is endogenous—i.e., rather than Trump evaluations driving support for China tariffs, perhaps the causal arrow goes in the opposite direction, with support for China tariffs driving Trump evaluations. We consider this possibility in Appendix 3, but our results provide strong evidence that Trump evaluations drive support for China tariffs and not the other way around.

support for China tariffs; these results indicate that Republicans and conservatives are more likely to support tariffs on Chinese goods. We also find that unemployment status ($b = 0.076$, $z = 2.60$) and union membership ($b = 0.089$, $z = 5.16$) are positively related to support for China tariffs, though surprisingly individuals who perceive that the economy has improved in the past year are also more supportive of China tariffs than those who perceive that the economy is worse ($b = 0.159$, $z = 13.10$). Individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to support tariffs on Chinese goods ($b = -0.012$, $z = -3.08$), while individuals born in the United States ($b = 0.085$, $z = 2.53$), women ($b = 0.072$, $z = 4.51$), Blacks ($b = 0.094$, $z = 3.69$), those identifying as other race ($b = 0.079$, $z = 2.52$), and older Americans ($b = 0.011$, $z = 21.23$) are more likely to support China tariffs. It is interesting to note that Asians ($b = -0.059$, $z = 1.45$) are neither more nor less likely to support China tariffs, though it is possible that this effect might vary for Asians of different nationalities.

Interaction effects for Trump favorability

While all Americans were affected by COVID to some extent, we suggest that not all Americans entered the COVID pandemic equally susceptible to information and rhetoric about China being the source of COVID. Many Americans were strong supporters of (then) President Trump, and these individuals would be expected to be responsive to Trump's rhetoric about the pandemic. Trump supporters were likely to evaluate the COVID pandemic through the filter of their support for Trump. On the other hand, many Americans were strong opponents of President Trump, and these individuals would be expected to have a contrary or reduced response to Trump's rhetoric about the pandemic. To be sure, even Trump opponents were affected by COVID, were likely to know that COVID originated in China, and subsequently would be likely to connect COVID to their evaluations of China, but it is likely that they would be less responsive to this information and anti-China rhetoric than Trump supporters. Given this, and consistent with processes associated with confirmation biases, we expect that the

effects of COVID news coverage and cumulative COVID deaths on support for tariffs on Chinese goods to be stronger among those with favorable views toward Trump than those with unfavorable views.

We can consider these possible moderating effects by estimating a model with interactions for Trump favorability, on one hand, and COVID news coverage and cumulative COVID deaths per 100K population, on the other. The results for our interaction model are presented in Model (2) of Table 1. First, the coefficients for COVID news coverage and cumulative death per 100K population represent the effects of these variables when Trump favorability equals 0 (i.e., among those who are strongly unfavorable in their evaluations of Trump). Clearly, COVID news coverage ($b = 0.146$, $z = 10.69$) has a strong positive effect on support for China tariffs, even among those who are strong Trump unfavorables. We note, however, that the magnitude of the coefficient for this variable is the same for both the interaction and non-interaction models. Cumulative deaths also have a significant positive effect on support for tariffs on Chinese goods ($b = 0.001$, $z = 2.40$), though it is interesting to note that this coefficient is about one-half the size of the analogous coefficient from the non-interaction model.

The two interaction coefficients suggest that the effect of cumulative COVID deaths on support for China tariffs is moderated by Trump favorability, but a similar pattern is not observed for COVID news coverage. For COVID news coverage, the interaction coefficient is statistically and substantively indistinguishable from 0 ($b = 0.001$, $z = 0.09$), suggesting that the effect of COVID news coverage is equally strong for both Trump supporters and opponents. Simply, COVID news coverage increases support for tariffs on Chinese goods across all levels of Trump support. On the other hand, the coefficient for the interaction of Trump favorability and cumulative COVID deaths per 100K population is positive and statistically significant ($b = 0.001$, $z = 2.72$), suggesting that increases in Trump favorability strengthen the effect of cumulative COVID deaths on support for tariffs on Chinese goods. Individuals who are highly favorable in their evaluations of Trump are more likely to translate cumulative COVID deaths into support for China tariffs than individuals who have highly unfavorable evaluations of Trump.

This pattern can be illustrated in Figure 2, in which we present predicted probabilities of support for China tariffs as a function of cumulative COVID deaths per 100K population, both for strong Trump favorables and strong Trump unfavorables. We find a positive and significant effect for strong Trump unfavorables, as shown in Model 2 of Table 1, but the effects is relatively weak. Moving from the lowest to highest values on the cumulative COVID deaths variable changes support for tariffs on Chinese goods by a modest 0.04 (from 0.310 to 0.350). On the other hand, the effect is considerably stronger for strong Trump favorables. Moving from the lowest to highest values on the cumulative COVID deaths variable changes support for Chinese tariffs from 0.568 to 0.701, a shift of 0.133. These results suggest that Trump supporters are more sensitive than Trump opponents to information about COVID deaths over time, though even Trump opponents exhibit some sensitivity to information about COVID deaths.

The bottom line is that our empirical findings are consistent with processes associated with both transference of grievance and confirmation biases. The observation that the magnitude of the COVID pandemic—reflected in cumulative COVID deaths and news coverage of the COVID pandemic—increased Americans' support for tariffs on Chinese goods indicates that many Americans transferred their grievances about the pandemic that originated in China to their attitudes about China trade policy, which is only tangentially-related to the pandemic. Furthermore, our finding that Trump favorables are more responsive than Trump unfavorables to information about cumulative COVID deaths in their home states carries with it the suggestion that Trump supporters and opponents treated this information differently. Trump supporters appear to have taken information about COVID deaths and converted it into attitudes toward China tariffs that comported with both Trump rhetoric about trade with China and the transfer of grievance process. While Trump opponents also were responsive to information about the magnitude of the COVID pandemic, when it comes to cumulative COVID deaths they were less

responsive to this information than were Trump supporters, insofar as the effect of this variable is weaker for Trump opponents.⁴

CONCLUSION

In this paper we consider how the COVID-19 related deaths and news coverage surrounding the pandemic have influenced Americans' attitudes toward U.S. trade practices with China. Specifically, we propose that the intensity of the COVID pandemic, news coverage of COVID on major U.S. networks, and elite rhetoric stemming from former U.S. president Donald Trump played a central role in facilitating Americans' support for trade tariffs on Chinese goods. Prior scholarship has linked objective economic conditions such as the unemployment rate and employment sector to how individuals assess the benefits of international trade. Moreover, previous research has explored how psychological factors such as confirmation bias affect how individuals view international trade. However, to our knowledge, there has not been any work to connect how the COVID pandemic (which originated in China) and news coverage surrounding the pandemic have influenced Americans attitudes towards U.S. trade practices with China. Our work adds to the existing literature on political psychology by considering how individuals process and attribute new information related to COVID.

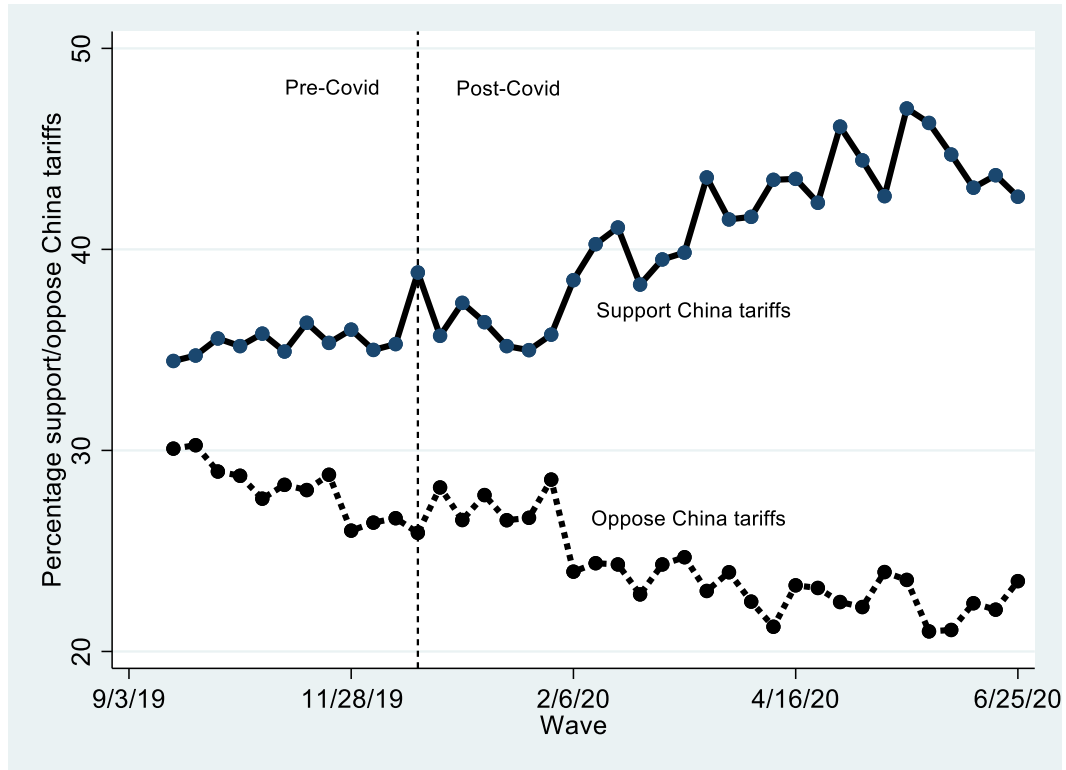
Specifically, we propose that psychological factors such as transfer of grievances and confirmation bias encouraged Americans to view COVID-related deaths as relevant when assessing their support for increased tariffs on Chinese imports. While COVID and well-established international trade practices are not evidently related, we argue that voters engage in two interrelated but distinct processes when processing new politically and economically relevant information. First, voters engage in transfer of grievances, whereby news coverage on one issue heightens the voters' sense of grievance on a

⁴ We should note that the pandemic era can be subdivided into two periods, one characterized by positive rhetoric by President Trump toward the Chinese government during the first two months of the pandemic, the other following mid-March and characterized by Trump's harsh rhetoric relating to the role of China in creating the pandemic. Arguably, the effect of the pandemic on support for China tariffs will be stronger during the negative rhetoric period. We consider this possibility in Appendix 4, finding that (1) the shift to the negative rhetoric period was associated with greater support for China tariffs, and (2) the magnitude of the shift was higher among individuals with positive Trump evaluations in comparison to individuals with negative Trump evaluations.

completely separate issue as long as these issues can be connected by a common thread such as a single actor (or group of actors) responsible for both problems. Second, voters engage in confirmation bias, leading them to absorb information that aligns with their existing beliefs and disregard information that contradicts their long-held views.

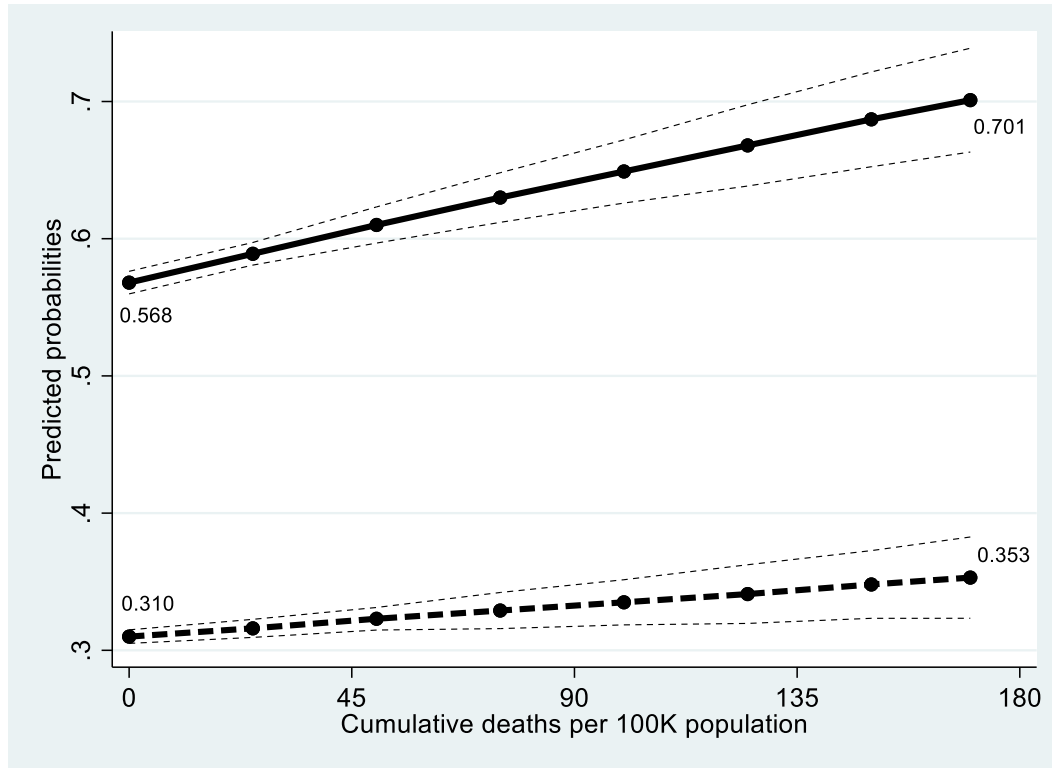
Our statistical analyses confirm that media coverage related to COVID has a positive and statistically significant effect on Americans' support for the imposition of tariffs on goods manufactured in China. The effects of cumulative COVID deaths has a lesser, but nevertheless positive and statistically significant effect on support for tariffs on Chinese imports. Further, the favorability of Americans' attitudes toward Donald Trump is a major driver of support for Chinese tariffs. Not only does Trump favorability have a strong direct effect on Americans' attitudes toward tariffs on Chinese goods, but Trump favorability also magnifies the effect of cumulative COVID deaths. Specifically, the effect of cumulative COVID deaths on support for China tariffs is significantly stronger for Americans with favorable attitudes toward Donald Trump than for Americans with unfavorable Trump attitudes. Ultimately, our empirical results are consistent with both transfer of grievance and confirmation biases processes. It's possible that both favorable views of Trump and unfavorable attitudes toward trade with China stem from heightened nationalism in the U.S., which our paper was not able to provide a full analysis for. However, at a minimum, our paper suggests that political elites, along with the widespread impact of a damaging pandemic, also shape Americans' opinions on trade with China.

Figure 1. Trends in support for and opposition to tariffs on China goods, Waves 12-50, 2019-2020
 Nationscape data



Note: each data point represents for percentage support for / opposition to China trade tariffs for each respective week.

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of support for China tariffs, by cumulative COVID deaths per 100K population, for Trump favorables and Trump unfavorables, 2019-2020 Nationscape data



Note: predicted probabilities are based on Model (2) in Table 1, holding all other independent variables in the model constant at their means. “Trump favorables” are individuals who have the highest score on the Trump favorability variable, while “Trump unfavorables” are individuals who have the lowest score on the Trump favorability variable.

Table 1. Ordered logit models of Americans' support for tariffs on Chinese goods, 2019-2020
Nationscape data

Variable	(1)		(2)	
	b	z	b	z
COVID news coverage	0.146	12.76***	0.146	10.69***
Cumulative deaths per 100K	0.002	5.23***	0.001	2.40**
Trump favorability	0.366	39.41***	0.359	37.51***
Trump favorability * COVID news coverage	---	---	0.001	0.09
Trump favorability * Cumulative deaths per 100K	---	---	0.001	2.72**
Partisan identification	0.057	11.05***	0.057	11.05***
Political ideology	0.128	14.85***	0.128	14.90***
Retrospective economic evaluation	0.159	13.10***	0.161	13.22***
Unemployed	0.076	2.60**	0.077	2.62**
Union membership	0.099	5.16***	0.098	5.12***
Education	-0.012	-3.08***	-0.013	-3.12***
Household income	0.002	1.57	0.002	1.54
Born in the United States	0.085	2.53**	0.085	2.52**
Gender	0.072	4.51***	0.073	4.60***
Race: black	0.094	3.69***	0.094	3.68***
Ethnicity: Hispanic	0.004	0.16	0.003	0.13
Race: Asian	-0.059	-1.45	-0.056	-1.38
Race: other race	0.079	2.52**	0.080	2.53**
Age	0.011	21.23***	0.011	21.28***
Pre-COVID period	-0.172	-2.02*	-0.171	-2.02*
Pre-COVID time counter	0.006	1.32	0.006	1.32
N	62,171		62,171	
χ^2	8666.91		8665.05	
Prob (χ^2)	0.0000		0.0000	

***prob < 0.001

**prob < 0.01

*prob < 0.05

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Appendix 1. Description of control variables

We include in our individual-level models additional variables, mostly as statistical controls. First, we include partisan identification, measured on the traditional seven-point scale ranging from 0 (strong Democrat) to 6 (strong Republican). Second, we consider the effects of political ideology. This variable is measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 0 (strong liberal) to 4 (strong conservative). We expect that these two variables will be positively related to support for tariffs on Chinese goods, suggesting that Republicans and conservatives would have higher levels of support for China tariffs than other groups.

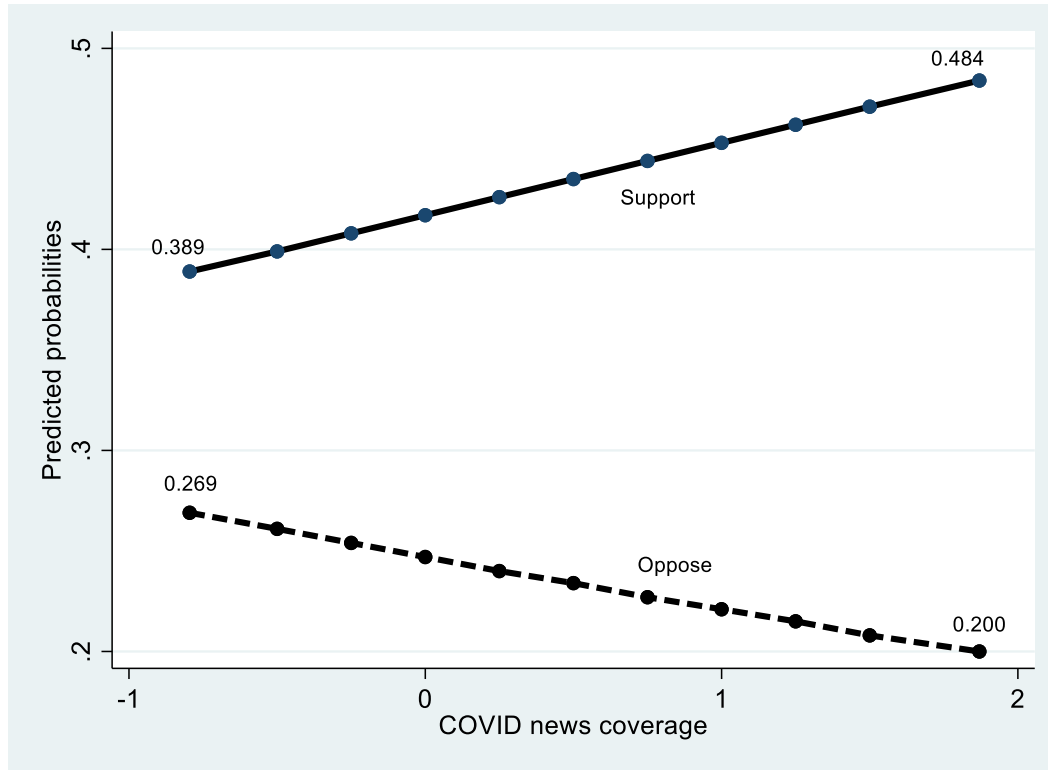
We consider the possibility that economic vulnerability may influence individuals' propensity to support tariffs on Chinese goods, so we include in our models three variables measuring this concept. First, we include a measure of retrospective economic evaluations, coded 2 if the respondent perceives that the economy is better in the last year, 1 if the respondent perceives that the economy is the same, and 0 if the respondent perceives that the economy is worse in the last year. Second, we include a measure of unemployment status, coded 1 for respondents who are unemployed or laid off, and 0 otherwise. Third, we measure union membership as a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if the respondent is a current or former union member, and 0 otherwise. We expect that the coefficient for the retrospective economic evaluations variable will be positive, indicating that those who perceive the economy as improving in the last year will be less likely to support China tariffs; on the other hand, being unemployed or a current/former union member will be positively related to support for imposing tariffs on Chinese goods.

We also include several socioeconomic and demographic variables in our models. First, education is measured on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 (3rd grade completed or less) to 10 (Ph.D. or other similar degree). Second, household income is measured on a 24-point scale, ranging from 0 (less than \$15K per year) to 23 (\$250K per year or above). Third, we include in our models several demographic attributes:

(1) gender, coded 1 for women and 0 for men; (2) race and ethnicity, captured using a series of dichotomous variables for whites, blacks, Latinos, Asians, and other race (including Native Americans and Pacific Islanders) and coded 1 for respondents in the respective racial/ethnic group, and 0 otherwise; (3) nativity status, coded 1 for respondents born in the United States, and 0 otherwise; and (4) age, in years.

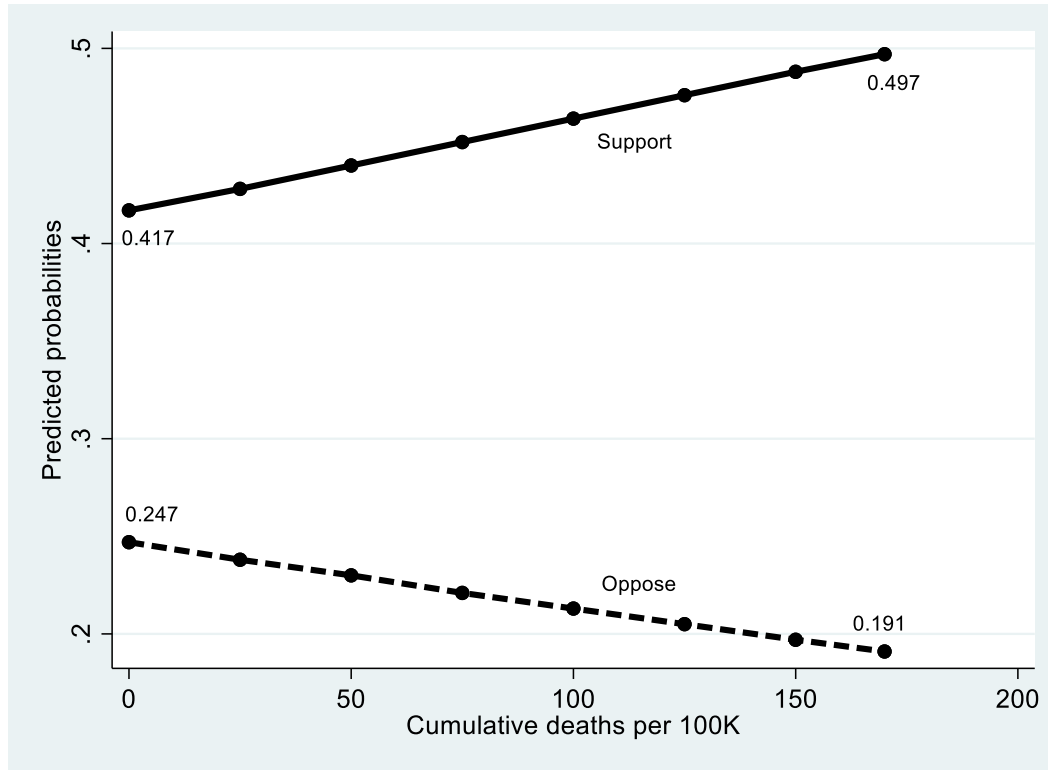
Finally, it is important to note that the COVID pandemic did not draw much attention in the United States until late December 2019, when there were two stories in the New York Times during the week of December 26 about a new virus that was infecting people in China. These stories occurred in Week 24 of the Nationscape data. We treat the period from Week 12-22 as the pre-COVID period, during which time Americans' support for China tariffs should not have been affected but the coming pandemic. In order to capture simple trends in attitudes toward China tariffs during the pre-COVID period, we include in our models two variables: (1) a dichotomous variable for Nationscape respondents interviewed during the pre-COVID period from Week 12 to Week 22; and (2) a time counter, coded 12 for Week 12 respondents, 13 for Week 13 respondents, and so on, through Week 22, and coded 0 from Week 23-50. This variable permits us to track simple trends in attitudes toward tariffs on Chinese goods during the pre-COVID period; once the pre-COVID period is over, the effects of variables representing COVID cases and deaths and news coverage of the COVID pandemic are activated.

Appendix Figure A1. Predicted probabilities of attitudes toward China tariffs, by COVID news coverage, 2019-2020 Nationscape data



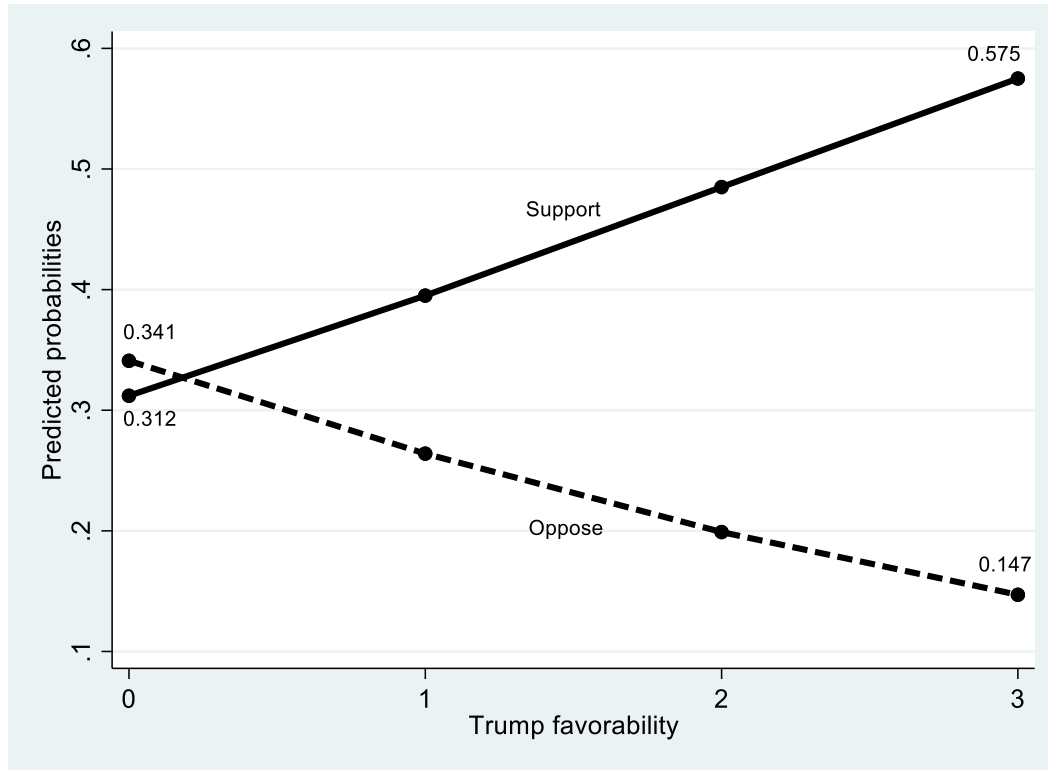
Note: predicted probabilities are based on Model (1) in Table 1, holding all other independent variables in the model constant at their means.

Appendix Figure A2. Predicted probabilities of attitudes toward China tariffs, by cumulative COVID deaths per 100K population, 2019-2020 Nationscape data



Note: predicted probabilities are based on Model (1) in Table 1, holding all other independent variables in the model constant at their means.

Appendix Figure A3. Predicted probabilities of attitudes toward China tariffs, by levels of Trump favorability, 2019-2020 Nationscape data



Note: predicted probabilities are based on Model (1) in Table 1, holding all other independent variables in the model constant at their means.

Appendix 2. Hierarchical ordered logit estimates for models of Americans' support for tariffs on Chinese goods, post-COVID period only, 2020 Nationscape data.

	(1)		(2)	
	b	z	b	z
COVID news coverage	0.139	11.12***	0.135	8.47***
Cumulative deaths per 100K	0.002	4.70***	0.001	2.09*
Trump favorability	0.372	32.12***	0.358	27.39***
Trump favorability * COVID news coverage	---	---	0.005	0.54
Trump favorability * Cumulative deaths per 100K	---	---	0.001	2.69**
Partisan identification	0.062	9.68***	0.062	9.69***
Political ideology	0.125	11.64***	0.126	11.71***
Retrospective economic evaluation	0.109	7.33***	0.113	7.52***
Unemployed	0.085	2.41**	0.087	2.44**
Union membership	0.088	3.65***	0.086	3.60***
Education	-0.012	-2.45**	-0.013	-2.50**
Household income	0.003	2.29**	0.003	2.26*
Born in the United States	0.113	2.72**	0.112	2.71**
Gender	0.089	4.42***	0.091	4.52***
Race: black	0.087	2.72**	0.087	2.70**
Ethnicity: Hispanic	-0.033	-1.07	-0.034	-1.09
Race: Asian	-0.076	-1.55	-0.072	-1.47
Race: other race	0.051	1.30	0.051	1.31
Age	0.012	19.25***	0.012	19.32***
N	39,685		39,685	
LR χ^2	5416.07		5416.34	
Prob (χ^2)	0.000		0.000	

***prob < 0.001

** prob < 0.01

*prob < 0.05

Appendix 3. Possible endogeneity between Trump evaluations and support for China tariffs

We posit that how Americans evaluate Donald Trump is a major driver of their support for China tariffs. Simply, we contend that individuals with favorable evaluations of Donald Trump will be significantly more likely to support tariffs on Chinese goods. As noted, our main rationale for this argument is that Donald Trump had been a strong advocate for reduced international trade, particularly with countries (such as China) that he deems to have taken advantage of American trade policy. Trump engaged in strong negative rhetoric about China and its trade practices, and so it is not surprising that Trump supporters would be more supportive of China tariffs than other Americans.

One alternative possibility is that Americans' evaluations of Donald Trump are driven by China trade attitudes—that is, that Americans who support Donald Trump do so because of Trumps' anti-China trade rhetoric. If this is true, then the causal direction is from China trade attitudes to Trump evaluations, and not the opposite. While this is a possibility, we are somewhat skeptical that China trade attitudes is the driver of Trump evaluations. In previous research, Essig et al. (2021) explore the effects of Trump evaluations on general support for trade, finding that Americans with favorable views toward Donald Trump are significantly more likely to support import restrictions and less likely to support free trade. Essig et al. consider explicitly the possibility that the relationship between Trump evaluations and trade policy is endogenous; they use an instrumental variable / two-stage least squares (IV-2SLS) approach and find that the direction of causality is from Trump evaluations to trade policy positions, rather than from trade attitudes to Trump evaluations. Furthermore, Keser et al. (2023) use panel data from the Voter Study Group surveys from 2011, 2016, and 2017 to explore the effects of Trump evaluations on *changes* in Americans' trade preferences. They find that Republicans in 2011 were *more* favorably oriented toward trade, but by 2016 this pattern had reversed, with Republicans *less* supportive of trade. Panel data permit Keser et al. to consider how changes in trade preferences at the individual level shifted in response to Trump favorability, and they find that favorable evaluations of

Trump are associated with movement from a pro-trade position to an anti-trade position. Hence it would appear that general trade attitudes follow Trump evaluations, rather than the other way around.

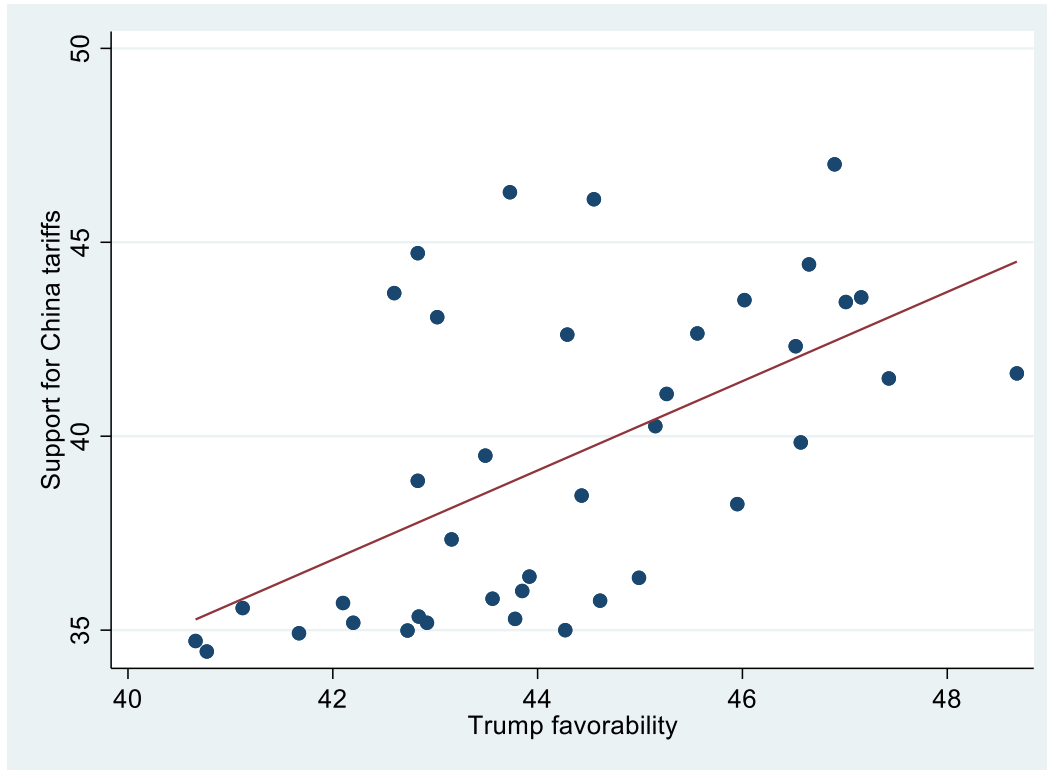
With that said, it is important to note that the works of Essig et al. (2021) and Keser et al. (2023) relate to general trade attitudes and do not explicitly consider the relationship between Trump evaluations and Americans' attitudes toward China tariffs. In order to gain some leverage over the direction of causality, we calculate mean levels of Trump favorability and the percentage of respondents who support tariffs on China trade for each of the 39 waves in the Nationscape data (i.e., from Wave 12 to Wave 50). As a starting point, we see in Appendix Figure A4 that there is a strong positive relationship between mean Trump evaluations and the percentage of Americans supporting China tariffs. Trump favorability is positively associated with higher percentages of Americans supporting China tariffs, and the impressions based on this scatterplot are reinforced by OLS estimates showing a positive and significant effect of Trump favorability ($b = 1.151$, $z = 4.25$). At the simplest level, mean Trump evaluations are associated with higher levels of support for China tariffs.

In Appendix Table A3.1 we consider the two possible directions for the relationship between Trump favorability and support for China tariffs. We estimate two error correction models (ECM). In the first model we depict changes in support for China tariffs as a function of lagged China tariff support, lagged Trump favorability, and changes in Trump favorability; this model permits us to consider how Trump favorability shapes support for China tariffs, as suggested in our theoretical discussion and empirical analyses. In the second model we depict changes in Trump favorability as a function of lagged Trump favorability, lagged support for China tariffs, and changes in support for China tariffs; this model permits us to consider the alternative view that it is China tariffs that drives Trump favorability.

As one can see, in the first model we find that lagged Trump favorability has a positive coefficient that exceeds conventional levels of statistical significance. It would appear that Trump favorability in the previous week results in larger positive changes in support for China tariffs. On the other hand, for the

second model we find no evidence that it is China tariffs that drive Trump favorability. Neither of the two China tariff coefficients approach statistical significance, indicating that neither previous levels of support for China tariffs nor changes in support for China tariffs matter in shaping levels of Trump favorability. These results provide strong evidence that the direction of causality is from Trump evaluations to support for China tariffs, and not the other way around.

Appendix Figure 4. Scatterplot of relationship between mean Trump favorability and the percentage of Americans supporting China tariffs, Waves 12-50, 2019-2020 Nationscape survey.



OLS regression results:

$$\text{Support for China tariffs} = -11.504 + 1.151(\text{Trump favorability}) + e$$

$(-12.00)^{***}$ $(4.25)^{***}$

N 39
 R^2 0.328
 F 18.03***

***prob < 0.001

** prob < 0.01

*prob < 0.05

Appendix Table A3.1. Error correction model estimates for models of Δ China tariff support and Δ Trump favorability, Waves 12-50, 2019-2020 Nationscape data

	b	z
Dependent variable:		
ΔChina tariff support		
China tariff support _{t-1}	-0.149	-2.28**
Trump favorability _{t-1}	0.320	2.30**
Δ Trump favorability	0.184	0.84
Intercept	-8.130	-1.59
N 38		
R ² 0.170		
F 2.32		
Dependent variable:		
ΔTrump favorability		
Trump favorability _{t-1}	-0.164	-1.56
China tariff support _{t-1}	-0.010	-0.19
Δ China tariff support	0.112	0.86
N 38		
R ² 0.145		
F 1.93		

Appendix 4. Exploring effects of Trump rhetoric on support for China tariffs

One of our arguments is that the effects of COVID news coverage and (perhaps) COVID deaths on Americans' support for China tariffs is due to the negative rhetoric used by (then) President Donald Trump to refer to the China origins of the pandemic. While it is no doubt the case that most Americans were aware of the China origins of the pandemic, Trump's negative rhetoric likely played a role in connecting the negative consequences of the pandemic to its country of origin. With his rhetoric Trump made it quite clear that China was responsible for the pandemic and the considerable costs imposed on the United States and other countries. Subsequently this likely generated an anti-China reaction among some Americans that was translated into greater support for China tariffs.

It is important to note, however, that Trump's rhetoric about China was not negative in the first few months of the pandemic (Qi and Garand 2024). During the months of January and February—i.e., before the pandemic struck the United States in full force—Trump downplayed risks of the pandemic and even expressed positive sentiments about how the Chinese government was handling the pandemic. On January 22, for instance, Trump indicated that he trusted the Chinese government and that the pandemic was totally under control (Belvedere 2020; Doggett 2021). On February 7 Trump congratulated the Chinese government for “doing a great job” (McDonald 2020), and throughout February continued to downplay the risks of the pandemic to the United States. It was only after the Trump administration declared a national emergency due to COVID on March 13 that Trump's rhetoric about China took a negative turn. Trump repeatedly referred to the “Chinese virus” (Hswen et al. 2021; Chiu 2020, Itkowitz 2020) and even made more vitriolic references to “Kung Flu.” We speculate that this change in the tone of Trump's public statements about China and the COVID pandemic had the effect of magnifying the negative effects of the pandemic on how Americans think about China and U.S. policies toward China, including China tariffs.

In order to test this assertion, we create a dichotomous variable to represent the negative rhetoric period, coded 0 from Wave 12-35 (during which time the COVID pandemic had not begun or during the initial stages when Trump's statements about the handling of the COVID pandemic by the Chinese government were generally positive) and 1 for Waves 36-50 (during which time Trump linked the COVID pandemic to China and used negative rhetoric about China's role in disrupting health systems in the United States and throughout the world). We expect that the coefficient for this variable will be positive, indicating that during the period of Trump's negative rhetoric about China had the effect of enhancing Americans' support for China tariffs. Further, we suggest that this effect will be stronger among Trump supporters, who are (we suggest) more likely to listen to and absorb the anti-China message found in Trump's negative rhetoric about the role of China in creating the pandemic. In order to capture the possible moderating effects of Trump favorability, we also include an interaction coefficient for the negative Trump rhetoric period and Trump favorability; the coefficient for this variable is hypothesized to be positive, indicating that the effect of the negative rhetoric period should be stronger among Trump supporters than among Trump opponents.

In Appendix Table A4.1 we report the results for a hierarchical ordered logit model that considers the effects of the period of negative Trump rhetoric on support for China tariffs. Our findings are consistent with expectations. In Appendix Table A4.1 we see that the coefficient for the negative Trump rhetoric variable ($b = 0.235$, $z = 5.90$) is positive and statistically significant; this represents the effect of the negative rhetoric period for respondents who hold unfavorable attitudes toward Donald Trump. This coefficient indicates that respondents who do not support Trump and who are from survey waves during which Trump engaged in hostile rhetoric about China's role in the pandemic (i.e., those after mid-March) are significantly more likely to support China tariffs than respondents from prior survey waves, even controlling for COVID news coverage and cumulative COVID deaths. This coefficient translates into predicted probabilities of support for China tariffs of 0.296 for respondents in the period prior to the

negative rhetoric period and 0.348 for respondents in the negative rhetoric period, for a difference of 0.052. Even among Trump opponents approximately 5% become more supportive of China tariffs as the COVID pandemic and Trump's negative rhetoric about China heated up. Since these respondents are less likely to be responsive to Trump rhetoric, it is likely that this represents the effect of the COVID pandemic and its China origins.

In addition, we include an interaction variable for Trump evaluations and the negative Trump rhetoric variable; this interaction captures how the effect of negative Trump rhetoric changes as Trump evaluations increase by one unit. As one can see, the interaction coefficient is both positive and statistically significant ($b = 0.044$, $z = 3.23$), indicating that as Trump evaluations increase by one unit, the effect of the negative Trump rhetoric period increases by 0.044. Across the full range of the Trump evaluations variable this represents an increase of 0.132 (i.e., $3 * 0.044$) in the effect of the negative Trump rhetoric time period. This means that the total effect of the negative Trump rhetoric period increases from 0.235 to 0.367 (i.e., $0.235 + [3 * 0.044]$)—representing a 56% increase in the magnitude of the effect. For the strongest Trump supporters, there is an increase in the predicted probability of supporting China tariffs of 0.089 (i.e., from 0.543 for the pre-negative Trump rhetoric period to 0.632 during the negative Trump rhetoric period). It would appear that movement from strong negative to strong positive evaluations of Donald Trump resulted in an increase in the effect of the negative Trump rhetoric period from 0.052 to 0.089—almost a 4%-point increase. These results suggest that positive Trump evaluations nudged respondents to modest (but discernible) increases in support for China tariffs.

The bottom line is that, *within* the pandemic period, we can distinguish an initial period of approximately 10 weeks during which Donald Trump spoke favorably toward the role of the Chinese government in mitigating the pandemic. During that positive rhetoric period, there was an modest effect of the pandemic on support for China tariffs, reflecting (we suggest) a general reaction to the

pandemic and its connection to China. However, once the period of negative Trump rhetoric about China and its role in the pandemic started in mid-March, there is a discernible increase in support for China tariffs, both among Trump opponents but particularly among Trump supporters.

Appendix Table A4.1. Hierarchical ordered logit estimates for models of Americans' support for tariffs on Chinese goods, with Trump negative rhetoric period variables, 2019-2020 Nationscape data.

	b	z
COVID news coverage	0.041	2.32**
Cumulative deaths per 100K	0.001	2.37**
Trump favorability	0.346	32.99***
Negative Trump rhetoric period	0.235	5.90***
Trump favorability * negative Trump rhetoric period	0.044	3.23***
Partisan identification	0.056	10.80***
Political ideology	0.128	14.82***
Retrospective economic evaluation	0.181	14.58***
Unemployed	0.073	2.50**
Education	-0.013	-3.20***
Household income	0.002	1.33
Born in the United States	0.085	2.51**
Union membership	0.097	5.07***
Gender	0.073	4.61***
Race: black	0.094	3.67***
Ethnicity: Hispanic	-0.001	-0.05
Race: Asian	-0.056	-1.38
Race: other race	0.083	2.63**
Age	0.011	21.24***
Pre-COVID period	-0.185	-2.24*
Pre-COVID time counter	0.006	1.29
N	62.171	
LR χ^2	8728.29	
Prob (χ^2)	0.000	

***prob < 0.001

** prob < 0.01

*prob < 0.05