

TTIP: The American Debate

No. 32 September 2015

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Despite protest and apprehension on both ends of the Atlantic, TTIP ambles on towards a questionable resolution in the not-too-distant future. With protests in the Berlin drawing attention to European discontent, it is necessary to examine how opinions in the US have developed in the political arena as well as throughout the general public. Gauging public opinion in the United States has become increasingly difficult in a political system that is being described more and more often as polarized and fragmented. Is TTIP yet another issue upon which Americans cannot seem to find common ground, or is the issue less divisive than one would expect? If the former is true, what issues concerning TTIP are Americans most focused on?

The most recent legislative event regarding TTIP seems to indicate somewhat of a consensus among politicians. A trade authority bill was passed by both houses, through an admittedly narrow margin in the House of Representatives, and subsequently signed into law by the end of June this year. This mechanism allows trade agreements submitted within six years by the president to be put to a simple yes or no vote. The bill caused much more discord among democrats, who are traditionally more resistant to such trade agreements, with the leaders in both the Senate (Harry Reid) and the House (Nancy Pelosi) simultaneously opposing the bill while downplaying the visible rift between party members.

If the recent primary campaigns of both parties have provided us with any insight into what issues each party deems to be the most pertinent to their respective voter bases, TTIP does not attract the same political attention as seen throughout the European Union. Indeed, no mention of TTIP was made during either of the Republican debates thus far, and the only trade agreement mentioned in the Democratic debate (The Trans-Pacific Partnership) was being used briefly as a vehicle to question former secretary Clinton's political consistency, nothing more. However, are these recent political developments a greater reflection of the opinions of common Americans?

A recent parallel Pew Research Center Survey, in partnership with the Bertelsmann Foundation, seems to support this lack of enthusiastic opposition, and in some cases mere awareness. When compared with the Germans that were interviewed, nearly 10 percent more Americans (28% to 19%) felt they did not have enough information about the trade agreement to form an opinion. Of the Americans that had an opinion, 53 percent were in favor of it, with an even greater support (67%) among young Americans. Americans were also far more partial to harmonizing regulatory standards (76% in US, 45% in Germany), and transatlantic investment (66% in US, 49% in Germany).

This general support of TTIP is reflected in the media as well. With the relatively few articles published by major news sources that concern

it, the vast majority cast the trade agreement in a favorable light. Such articles tout the benefits of TTIP to our automotive industry (Wall Street Journal), to increasing economic clout and soft power (The Washington Post), or to an increase in access to European agricultural products (The New York Times).

The general calm and quiet surrounding TTIP at the moment does not necessarily indicate that America is in full support, however. If the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) can serve as any kind of measure, trade agreements of this magnitude and significance are hard to garner universal support for. In fact, the more imminent trade agreement with 12 Latin and Asian partners, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, is mired in controversy and public disdain. The top two Democratic presidential candidates have both spoken out in protest of TPP, and the current Republican frontrunner, Donald Trump, has also voiced his opposition.

It is hard to speculate whether general support for TTIP will dwindle or not as it draws closer to the foreground in American politics. At the moment, however, European concern over the deal largely overshadows that of America. Protests over potential concessions in food regulations (particularly GMOs and beef), environmental policy, and pharmaceutical oversight reflect this sentiment. Regardless, the road to completion of the agreement will surely not be a smooth one. Regulatory harmonization in the agricultural sector alone appears rife with hurdles and potential setbacks. Powerful lobbies seeking to preserve valuable market power coupled with common cultural objections concerning food

safety and preservation will make winning over the hearts and minds of both private and public actors no small task. Whether or not America will ultimately break from divisive, partisan trends to support a deal with the EU has yet to be seen.

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