

## Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set Globalization and the Debate over Free Trade

URL: [https://americanarchive.org/primary\\_source\\_sets/globalization](https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/globalization)

### Teaching Tips

These clips are divided into three modules: (1) The first four clips trace a historical narrative documenting important stages of the rise of globalization in the second half of the twentieth century; (2) The next four clips provide differing perspectives on the costs and benefits of global trade and free trade arrangements; (3) The last four clips are related to the rise of Donald Trump, and how trade policy and critiques of globalization informed his 2016 campaign and presidency. There is an associated classroom activity for each module, as well as a debate activity that would work well with the set as a whole.

### Background Information

Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:

- The rise and maturation of an industrialized economy in the U.S. by the mid-20th Century
- General background about policies that can either promote or restrict international trade (e.g. tariffs, quotas)

## Essential Question

In the balance, has the increase in global trade since World War II harmed or benefited Americans?

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## General Discussion Questions

- What arguments would a defender of free trade make about the benefits of globalization?
  - What arguments would a critic of free trade make about the costs of globalization?
  - What policies should the U.S. government pursue with respect to trade with companies in other countries? For example, should the U.S. place tariffs on imported goods?
  - When considering the impact of global trade on people in the United States, economists commonly argue that global trade provides an overall economic benefit to American society as a whole, but a subset of Americans will be worse off as a result. What should the government do if a given policy would provide a net benefit to society but would harm a specific sub-group in that society?
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## Classroom Activities

1) Watch the following clips:

- [Postwar Optimism about the Economic Benefits of International Trade \(1965\)](#)
- [The Growing “Threat” of Imported Goods in the 1970s \(1977\)](#)
- [NAFTA Promotes U.S. Trade with Mexico and Canada \(1995\)](#)
- [Ocean Trade and the Explosion of Global Commerce \(1994\)](#)

Then show students [the following chart](#) showing the rise of imports starting in the 1970s. Discuss the following questions:

- What kinds of goods became increasingly likely to be imported into the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries?
- What are some reasons that certain imported goods might be more desirable to American consumers?
- What social, economic, or political factors help explain the rise in international trade over this timeframe?

2) Ask students to watch the following clips:

- [Walmart, Sweatshops, and the Price of Cheap Clothes \(2004\)](#)
- [Organized Labor’s Critique of Globalization and Free Trade \(1999\)](#)
- [Defending Free Trade Against its Critics \(2004\)](#)
- [The Complex Impact of Globalization on Alabama Communities \(2005\)](#)

These sources collectively illuminate some of the complex pros and cons of global trade. Then have students discuss the following questions:

- What are some ways that people benefit from global trade?
- What are some ways that people are harmed by global trade?
- What are some examples of specific people or groups that might benefit from global trade? Specific people and groups that are harmed?
- What do *you* think? In the balance, are Americans better or worse off as a result of global trade? What actions do you think the government should (or shouldn’t) take to restrain or restrict international commerce?

3) During his ultimately successful 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump railed against the impact that free trade deals and the rise of China had had on American businesses and workers. In this regard, Trump was far more critical of globalization and free trade than most Republican political leaders in recent U.S. History. Ask students to watch the following clips:

- [The Lessons of the “Elephant Chart” \(2017\)](#)
- [Debating Global Trade in the Age of Trump \(2017\)](#)
- [Trump’s Trade Policy and Criticism of China \(2018\)](#)
- [The Biden Administration’s Combative Stance with China \(2024\)](#)

These sources revolve around the views and policies around trade of then-President Donald Trump and his Democratic successor, Joe Biden. Then discuss the following questions:

- Donald Trump performed meaningfully better than other recent Republican candidates among certain demographic groups, including white voters without college degrees, labor union members, and residents of certain “Rust Belt” counties. Do you think Trump’s views on trade help explain that political appeal? Why or why not?
- The Trump administration increased tariffs on a wide range of goods at various points during his first presidency. Based on the clips, what seem to be the potential benefits of raising tariffs? What are the potential drawbacks?
- Invite students to view this [longitudinal public opinion data](#) about whether Americans view global trade as an opportunity or a threat. Ask them: what trends do you notice? How can you relate them to what you learned about the political developments starting in the mid-2010s? What explanations can you give for why members of both parties became more optimistic about global trade while Trump was in office in the late 2010s? The change after Biden’s election in 2020?

4) Divide students into three groups for a free trade debate.

- Group 1: supporters of free trade. Using evidence and arguments from the clips in this set (and perhaps from supplemental research), students in this group explain the benefits of global trade and why protectionist policies would be misguided.
- Group 2: opponents of free trade. Using evidence and arguments from the clips in this set (and perhaps from supplemental research), students in this group argue for the harms that emanate from global trade and argue for policies that more forcefully restrain or restrict trade.
- Group 3: a jury of Americans. Members of this group are each assigned a role (e.g., a worker at German-owned car factory in Alabama, the owner of a small business that uses imported materials, the leader of a steelworkers’ union, a farmer from the Great Plains, etc.) and they ultimately assess which side’s views are more compelling.

The members of Group 1 (pro-free trade) and Group 2 (free trade skeptics) start by giving some short, pre-written speeches, followed by extemporaneous debate where students provide unscripted rebuttals to opposing arguments. Then members of Group

3 (jury) pose questions to the debaters. The debate ends with each jury member explaining which side's arguments their character would agree with, and why. Afterwards, have an "out of character" debrief in which students can explore what they really believe.