Trade Rhetoric Geography in the US Presidential Election Speeches

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Abstract

The US presidency literature generally views the president as the non-particularistic figure who represents national interest. However, less is known about presidential candidates, who have different incentive structure from that of the president. We argue that presidential candidates are particularistic at the stage of delivering presidential election speeches. With the text analysis of all the presidential campaign speeches in the last three elections, we show that where presidential candidates deliver campaign speeches determine their framing of trade. Moreover, we find that conditional on political party of the presidential candidates, their usage of the trade rhetoric is more apparent in rustbelt regions and swing states.

1. Introduction

Donald Trump secured votes from most of the rust belt regions in 2016 presidential election. Among many reasons of this success, his framing of trade as “unfair” and his promise to “make America great again” with the protectionist trade policy appealed voters of rust belt regions. This echoes the recent IPE literature that voters suffering from job security due to trade punish the incumbent president by choosing the presidential candidate from the other party (Jensen et al 2017; Margalit 2011).

Although the voter punishment theory may explain why Trump got elected, this theory does not answer to the following two questions. First, how presidential candidates would *ex-ante* respond to expected voter punishment? Given that presidential candidates are strategic actors who can preemptively influence public opinion through public speeches, they have motivations to depict trade in a way that would result in maximizing their vote shares. Second, provided that geography matters in voter’s trade-related job security, would presidential candidates speak differently when they deliver speeches in trade-sensitive regions? Traditional international trade theory, such as Heckscher–Ohlin theorem and external economies of scale, predicts industrial specialization by region. If geography is the factor deciding the level of job security in trade, rational presidential candidates would consider geographical characteristics when they deliver speeches.

To answer the two questions, we conduct a text analysis with all the presidential speeches of the last three elections, from 2008 to 2016. With the structural topic model, we distinguish the different trade rhetoric in rustbelt and non-rustbelt regions. After constructing the document-term matrix (DTM) with the trade-related unigram words, we construct a regression model of triple interactions with political party of presidential candidates, rustbelt region, and swing states. We show that conditional on political party, rustbelt region and swing states are significant predictors in how frequent would presidential candidates bring up trade rhetoric in their speeches. In the last section, we conduct sentiment analysis on the selected trade-related speeches of presidential candidates, thereby qualitatively supporting our argument.

2. Literature Review

3. Theory

4. Hypotheses

5. Empirical Strategy

5-1. STM

5-2. DTM

6. Data and Data Structure

- Presidential Speech Map

7. Main Results

- Vote margin—FREX proportion graph

- Regression

8. Conclusion

This research develops the literature on American politics and IPE in two ways. First, this research dis-entangles the president and presidential candidates. While the former is more institutionally bound by separation of powers, the latter has more discretion in positioning-taking. Additionally, their incentive to be the president drive them to use the discretion in a way that maximizes probability of winning the election. Second, this research brings back the importance of geography in international trade in linkage with public opinion. Geography not only explains special interest group, but also explains differences in public opinion by region.