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**Protectionist attitudes among voters in OECD countries:
causes, consequences and ways forward**

Extended Abstract

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From a standard economic point of view, international trade is desirable as it may increase economic efficiency and the total welfare of all countries involved. Beyond economists, also a majority of citizens, e.g. in most EU countries, say they benefit from international trade (highest share in Sweden: 89 %; EU 62 %). However, public attitudes towards international trade vary considerably across countries and regions. For instance, in Italy, only 45 % (up from 35 % in 2019) of citizens report perceiving personal benefits from international trade. This is the lowest share within the European Union. Correspondingly, approximately 50 % of Italian respondents state that they do not benefit from international trade (EU 2024).

Citizens in diverse OECD countries increasingly favour protectionism; many of them have voted for authoritarian right-wing populist candidates and parties that explicitly call for the introduction of trade barriers as a means of protecting domestic economies. Such policy positions have subsequently gained momentum in many OECD countries, such as the U.S., U.K. and beyond, thereby severely challenging standard economic trade policies.

Against this background the research objectives of this contribution are to:

- 1) Assess citizen's support for protectionism or for international trade in OECD countries.
- 2) Analyse the causes and determinants of protectionist attitudes.
- 3) Address the role and impacts of populism triggering protectionist attitudes.

- 4) Identify major standard economic normative and behavioural assumptions as (unintended) conceptual causes and drivers of protectionism and self-defeating free trade policies.
- 5) Draw conclusions about ways forward for economics, societies and economies.

Overall, in order to achieve these objectives, we build our analysis on diverse existing empirical studies on international trade attitudes to identify standard economic normative and behavioural assumptions that may unintentionally contribute to backlashes against trade resulting in self-defeating international trade policies.

First, we provide a brief international overview of prevailing attitudes on trade and trade policies with a focus on EU countries, the UK. and the U.S. Thereafter, we analyse individual, regional and sectoral as well as further causes and drivers of these trade attitudes.

Consistent with Heckscher-Ohlin and Stolper-Samuelson concepts, education has often been shown to significantly impact attitudes on trade policies. Beyond this, we will reconsider other individual characteristics that have been identified to determine support for protectionism or for international trade. Moreover, we will revisit further sectoral, regional or national assessments. Among those we pay special attention on studies identifying economic insecurity and grievances of (potential) losers of jobs, income etc. due to import competition in manufacturing sectors of left-behind regions (Rodrick 2025; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Autor et al. 2013). We also assess the role that authoritarian populist parties have adopted by triggering affective political polarization and reshaping economic grievances into seemingly cultural conflicts between the “real people” and a “hostile liberal political elite” (Rodrik 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Building on this, we discuss standard economic normative and behavioural assumptions that may unintentionally contribute to feelings of injustice and conflicts as a result of

international trade. These assumptions include the utilitarian economics' goal of utility maximization, e.g. in the sense of achieving a maximum GDP. We argue that enforcing changes which focus exclusively on total income maximization, may violate the perceived distributional fairness, e.g. in the eyes of low-skilled losers of trade and of other citizens. Notably, as according to the Kaldor-Hicks criterion, for a national trade policy to be economically efficient and desirable, it is sufficient if the winners of trade gain more than the losers lose, so that the winners *could* compensate the losers; however, such consequences of global trade would only be fair if the compensation actually took place (Beckerman 2017). Moreover, conflicts will arise, when the achievement of maximum total income as the only economic goal results in sacrificing losers of trade for the greater good. Citizens may then have reasons to believe that their autonomy, dignity, agency and control are jeopardised by liberal governments who enforce economically efficient, but procedurally unjust, trade policies. In these contexts, populist parties can succeed in confirming citizens' grievances and fears of a loss of control. Against this backdrop, there is a risk that economic international trade policies will unintentionally reinforce populism, which is capable of winning votes by calling for or announcing trade barriers (Margalit 2019). Ultimately, standard economic trade policies may then become self-defeating. A further standard economic normative assumption that may unintentionally contribute to protectionist backlashes is the exclusive focus on the income-generating role of employment resulting in a neglect of the multidimensionality of human well-being (Sen 2009), grievances and suffering. Not least, we address the universalism of utilitarian economics. This assumption implies that a job in home country can easily be replaced by a job in foreign country as, also for citizens, both jobs ought to have the same ethical value. We discuss this assumption from a relational perspective in the light of public attitudes towards international trade, as well as with

respect to backlashes and populist strategies against international trade (Beckerman 2017; Margalit 2019).

Based on this and further discussions we will conclude how standard economics can be conceptually developed further to overcome risks of self-defeat, regain effectiveness of international trade policies and mitigate citizens' grievances related to real or perceived injustices of international trade policies. Furthermore, we address the need and ways of strengthening democratic participation and deliberation processes as a precondition to mitigate populist challenges and to strengthen citizens and economies.

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