

Political Contestation about International Economic Agreements: Lessons for the Canada-UK Trade Relationship after Brexit

About the project

This knowledge synthesis project looks at our understanding of why international economic agreements create contentious political debates within broader society in an attempt to draw lessons for the upcoming negotiations of a new Canada-United Kingdom (UK) trade agreement. The report looks at the literature of politicization to address four main points:

- Which factors affect society's response? Why do some international trade agreements become politically contentious, while others hardly register in public debates? Why can one and the same agreement become more contentious in one political/regional context than in others?
- Which specific aspects of a Canada-UK economic agreement could become contentious? In the Canada-UK context, can we predict the controversies in the development of a new bilateral agreement?
- How can policy-makers shape the institutional context in which political contestation about international economic agreements occurs? What are best practices for increasing the transparency of the negotiation process, incorporating diverse stakeholders and viewpoints into the negotiations, and informing the broader public about negotiation results, so that politicization is constructively fed into the policy process?
- Which communication strategies work for proponents and opponents of international economic agreements when an agreement has become contentious? Which arguments and framing strategies have been identified? What

lessons can proponents and opponents of a Canada-UK economic agreement draw to help them make an effective case to the public?

Key findings

- Previously, contentious debate has occurred when an international trade agreement was seen as a threat to state sovereignty. In addition, controversies about one agreement have sometimes led to the politicization of others in a diffusion effect. In different countries, a range of factors and conditions affected the path to politicization, including political opportunity structures, such as traditional political identities, and the resources and strategies of political actors.
- While a Canada-UK economic agreement does not currently appear to be contentious, politicization of a new bilateral agreement cannot be ruled out. It may be triggered by provisions on sensitive economic sectors, such as fishing and dairy industries, as well as by national and subnational identity concerns.
- Trade policies of the Canadian and UK governments should not attempt to suppress contentious debate, but seek dialogue with an agreement's critics and channel public contestation into an inclusive and evidence-based public debate. The report identifies promising strategies for increasing transparency of the trade policy process and for bringing about limited or open inclusion of civil society.
- The report also provides insights into framing strategies and campaign dynamics that can help both opponents and proponents of a Canada-UK trade deal make their case to the public. ■

Policy implications

- Clearly separate negotiations for a Canada-UK economic agreement from negotiations for a future agreement between the UK and the United States. The latter agreement is likely to be considerably more controversial, especially in the UK, and could politicize a Canada-UK agreement by association.
- The Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) provides a suitable template for a proposed Canada-UK trade agreement. Sectors such as agriculture and fisheries would impose some difficulty if an extension of CETA is planned. An important area of interest for Canada will be the UK financial services sector.
- As the debate unfolds, in the face of potential opposition to the deal, the negotiating parties can use public consultation to renew the agenda and to increase support for a trade deal. Such a platform would allow the involvement of the public and stakeholders in the process and the discussion of the particular issues that have become contentious.
- The future Canada-UK trade agreement will likely be a multidimensional agreement. Technical arguments that focus solely on the institutional details of the trade deal will not shape public opinion as much as the vivid, concrete and emotional ones that touch upon the public's day-to-day concerns. The most influential arguments will likely touch upon the issues of economic benefits/costs, potential loss of national sovereignty, and implications for national identity. ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

Read the full report

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