

The Depth and Contention of Preferential Trade Agreements

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Abstract: This study addresses the questions of when and why some preferential trade agreements (PTAs) become contentious. Although emerging literature has paid attention to the failure of trade negotiations, few studies have explained the rare but important occurrence of anti-PTA protests. To answer this question, this study contends that PTAs with deeper commitment levels are more likely to trigger social protests. Using rare-event models, this study finds evidence of a positive association between the depth and contention of PTAs. The results demonstrate that, although states have economic and political incentives to seek deeper trade cooperation, such decisions have a higher chance of facing domestic resistance.

Keywords: Free Trade, Trade Negotiations, Contentious Politics, Social Movement

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Introduction

When and why do preferential trade agreements (PTAs) become contentious? Trade politics scholarship assumes that those who can benefit from free trade support PTAs, whereas those who lose advantages resist and oppose PTAs (Milner 1999; Baccini 2019). Nonetheless, despite the embedded costs of signing PTAs, not every trade agreement negotiation witnesses domestic resistance in signatory countries. This empirical pattern suggests that victims of free trade do not necessarily seek coordinated and collective action to fight every PTA.

Empirically, such a wide variation in social responses to PTAs can be seen in the history of foreign trade negotiations in both Taiwan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). The Taiwanese organized a nationwide demonstration against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement with Mainland China in 2014 (Ho 2015). However, Taiwanese citizens did not pay close attention to the fact that the Taiwanese government had signed the free trade agreement (FTA) with New Zealand (ANZTEC) in 2013. Moreover, Taiwan's Dairy Farmer Association (2011) estimated that after ANZTEC became effective in 2025, Taiwan's dairy farming sector would sustain economic losses of up to "4 billion New Taiwan dollars" (approximately \$1.22 billion) because of duty exemption on imported New Zealand dairy products (Taiwan's Dairy Farmer Association 2011). Similarly, negotiations between the Korea–US FTA fostered a series of mass protest between May and July 2008, while bargaining and legislative reviews of the Korea–Australia FTA were relatively peaceful in the ROK (Park 2009).

This study integrates trade agreement literature with contentious political studies to explain this puzzle and the variation in social reactions to PTAs. Specifically, the study contends that PTAs with deeper commitment levels contribute to the formation of anti-PTA social movements for two reasons. The first is based on self-interested actions (Baldwin 1989). While a PTA with a stronger commitment generates binding effects, it also involves more trade concessions and causes greater harm to the victims of free trade (Rogowski 1990; Milner 1999; Lechner 2016; Baccini 2019). When perceiving the relative decline in their ability to shape the agenda-setting process, societal actors who suffer from free trade increase their willingness to organize protests against

PTAs. The second argument focuses on the framing and intervention effects of public opinion (Mansfield and Mutz 2009). Because citizens lack the specific information and knowledge to learn about the utilities and consequences of trade policies (Mansfield and Mutz 2009), this orientation allows opponents of free trade to strategically interpret information that mobilizes resistance. In particular, stronger commitment to tariff reductions enhances citizens' perceptions of the impact of PTAs on their well-being. As such, advocates of anti-PTA groups may be more likely to trigger and organize social movements when the government seeks deep PTAs.

Using rare-event models, this research finds supporting evidence at the 0.10 significance level for the positive association between the depth of PTAs and the occurrence of anti-PTA protests. Rare-event models have been developed to address the problem of low frequency in outcome variables (King and Zeng 2001). In this dataset, which merges the Design of Trade Agreements (DESTA) database (Dür, Baccini, and Elsig 2014) with the Mass Mobilization Data Project Dataverse (Clark and Regan 2016), the occurrence of social movements regarding PTAs accounted for only 1.68% of the total number of PTAs signed between 1990 and 2020. The post-estimation of the statistical analysis demonstrates that as the PTA depth increases from the lowest (-1.5) to the highest (2.1) during the period of analysis, the predicted probability of a PTA facing a protest strongly increases by 0.1694. In summary, this result quantifies the magnitude of the PTA depth in triggering the opposition movement.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section synthesizes the literature on trade and contentious politics by discussing the costs and benefits of PTAs. The third section elaborates on the testing logic and hypotheses. The research design section illustrates the coding schemes, data sources, and research methods. The last two sections present the empirical findings and contributions of this study.

Literature Review: The Costs and Benefits of PTAs

Trade policy refers to a collection of rules and regulations regarding the exchange of goods and services, including tariffs, subsidies, and import and export quotas (Gilpin 2001). A preferential trade agreement

is an international agreement entailing the elimination of tariffs on goods and services in particular areas (Duina 2013; Dür, Baccini, and Elsig 2014). Regarding the level of PTAs, scholars have differentiated the ladders of economic integration into FTAs or areas, customs unions, common markets, and economic unions (Balassa 1961). Customs unions comprise an FTA and common external tariff. Common markets encompass the arrangements of free trade areas, common tariffs, and the free movement of labor and capital within the bloc. The final stage of economic integration is economic union, which adopts a uniform economic and monetary policy in addition to the above features (Balassa 1961).

State leaders sign PTAs to reap positive political and economic returns at domestic and international levels. The primary economic benefits are that PTAs enable states to increase foreign direct investment, expand market size, and reduce the transaction costs of trade (Dür, Baccini, and Elsig 2014; Hofmann, Osnago, and Ruta 2019). Signing PTAs can help accomplish these economic goals because they send a costly signal of commitment and, therefore, reassure the private sector. The reasons are that violations of PTAs, such as exploitation and tariff imposition, are likely punished by domestic voters, and that such disputes can be resolved through international arbitration mechanisms (Baccini 2019). In addition, seeking PTAs can serve as a policy tool to exchange for security cooperation (Wesley 2008; Lee 2012). Because FTAs improve each other's economic interdependence, they are more effective than rhetorical statements to tie the interests of a stronger ally and thus bolster stability within the region (Mansfield 1994; Wesley 2008). For example, the US–Singapore FTA in 2003 was conceived of as a reward to the Singapore government, which authorized the United States to build its military bases in Southeast Asia (Lee 2012).

However, signing PTAs also risks job loss and income inequality. Along with market expansion, companies often move jobs to countries with lower wage limits, and trade agreements often lack enforceable labor protection (Margalit 2011; Wang 2020). This phenomenon is labeled as “a race to the bottom in labor standards” because workers cannot share the economic growth when governments and employers aim to reap the competitive advantage of cheap labor (Chan 2003). Moreover, the rising influx of capital exacerbates income inequality because skilled-labor

occupations and industries can increase their wealth after enforcing PTAs, whereas those who lack such endowments suffer (Goldberg and Pavcnik 2004). For these reasons, although these consequences are foreseeable, policymakers cannot guarantee peaceful negotiations while seeking PTAs.

Another hurdle to free trade is the fragmented political systems of veto players who have institutional or partisan power to veto policy changes (Tsebelis 2011). The logic is that as the number of political actors with veto power increases, it becomes more difficult to develop a consensus and change policy output (Mansfield, Milner, and Pevehouse 2007; 2008). As a result, governments find it challenging to seek PTAs or resist protectionism under the conditions of a divided government, fragmented party systems, and decentralized political structures because these institutions feature a higher number of veto players (Milner 1999; Milner and Mansfield 2012).

Despite these obstacles, the debate remains over whether governments can bypass or minimize domestic resistance. This institutional argument acknowledges that East Asian countries' state capacities differ from those of Western democracies. Unlike Western liberal countries, which are responsive to societal pressure, East Asian governments often opt for a top-down or centralized approach to promote economic competitiveness (Johnson 1995; Koo 2010; Johnson 1995). In particular, East Asian states have great autonomy and the capacity to downplay or suppress domestic challenges to economic policy.

For instance, the ROK government seized a policy window to introduce new FTA initiatives after 1997 because the public agreed to increase executive power to overcome the financial crisis. Certainly, the ROK government managed to transform its developmental mercantilism into liberalism due to the fear of being excluded from the world trade system (Koo 2010). The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis accelerated this transformation because the political influence of protectionist veto players declined. These veto players, including vocal labor unions and farmers' representatives, were temporarily undermined by Dae-jung Kim's administration, which sought to satisfy the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity loan conditions (Koo 2010).

However, resorting to international pressures puts decisionmakers in the dilemma of dealing with domestic antagonists. It has been

acknowledged that neoliberal ideology influences experts and decisionmakers in the World Bank, IMF, and World Trade Organization (WTO) (Chorev and Babb 2009; Keohane 2012; Azedi and Schofer 2023). Most Global South countries or countries in economic downturns have no choice but to accept proposals designed by those international financial institutions to acquire the necessary aid for development and survival. As such, these institutions have been criticized for overlooking their impact on “human security,” a non-traditional notion that shifts the focus from threats to states to individuals’ challenges (Vogel 2012). This unequal arrangement can foster massive transnational opposition, such as the Seattle WTO Protest in 1999, to address the impact of free trade ideology and trade agreements (Smith 2001; Azedi and Schofer 2023).

Theory: How the Depth of PTAs Leads to Contention

This study provides two explanations as to why an increase in PTA level depth contributes to the formation of anti-PTA social movements. Both approaches presume the presence of two domestic groups competing for trade policy outputs: those contesting to change governments’ decisions to sign PTAs, and those opting for the status quo (Rogowski 1990; Spilker, Bernauer, and Umaña 2018; Carnegie and Gaikwad 2022).¹ Based on this assumption, theorists develop arguments for how changing conditions, such as pursuing PTAs, shape relative power, different preferences, and distinctive perceptions between pro- and anti-PTA groups.

Following the self-interested perspective (Baldwin 1989), the first argument claims that government’s pursuit of deepened PTAs tilted the leverage of those for free trade vis-a-vis those for protectionism. The primary reason for this is that governments’ legalization of international trade regimes entails an increase in rule precision and information, which, in turn, reduces uncertainty and transaction costs for beneficiaries of free trade (Goldstein and Martin 2000). Particularly, a higher binding commitment to PTAs implies greater economic and political gains for those who support free trade (Lechner 2016; Baccini 2019). Thus, these people can gain more leverage to sustain PTAs in future agenda-setting processes. Because of the fear of losing influence and interest, potential

victims of free trade are more likely to view protests as a feasible alternative to addressing PTAs' economic harm.

The second logic emphasizes the intervening effects of public opinion and framing, which enable anti-PTA groups to mobilize, organize, and trigger social movements in the wake of deepened trade relationships. A frame is defined as the schemata of interpretation that allows political actors to label the occurrences of events within their life space and the world at large (Goffman 2010). Framing refers to the conscious strategic efforts of political actors to interpret shared understandings of events that legitimize and motivate collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 2012).

In trade issues, matters are framed for two reasons: The primary reason for this is that people have difficulty understanding the connections between government policies and their personal well-being, especially in complicated trade policies (Mansfield and Mutz 2009). Accordingly, this tendency leaves room for the elites to manipulate public information to attain desirable political outcomes.² Second, even though the public has a rough understanding of the consequences of PTAs, they lack the specific information and knowledge to learn about and infer the real impacts. Consequently, citizens pay more attention to trade policy by perceiving how it affects unemployment rates and national income (Mansfield and Mutz 2009). The deeper the PTA commitment agreed upon by the government, the greater the target audience's perceived trade concession and its impact on them (Baccini 2019). As a result, deeper PTAs make it easier for free-trade advocates and politicians to frame matters and successfully mobilize protesters.

For these reasons, I formulated the main hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis: PTAs with a deeper commitment level are more likely to become contentious and trigger social movements.

Research Design

To test this theory, I conducted a large-N statistical analysis of data between 1990 and 2020. The unit of analysis is the episode of PTAs, with each trade agreement representing an observation in the dataset. This study obtained data on PTAs from the DESTA database, which

was updated to Version 2.2 in 2023 (Dür, Baccini, and Elsig 2014). This database was merged with Version 5 of the Mass Mobilization Data Project Dataverse, which captured citizen movements in each country from 1990 to 2020 (Clark and Regan 2016). Using searches with keywords such as “trade,” “trade agreement,” “trade deal,” and “free trade,” at least 19 different incidents in which the mass was mobilized against their governments’ decisions to seek or sign a PTA were identified. The outcome variable was coded as 1 if the negotiation, signing, or enforcement of the PTAs witnessed protests by any member of the agreement.

However, only nine of these protests were included in the study’s dataset, for three reasons: First, because several protests generated strong pressure or because elections produced uncertainty, governments encountered difficulty in concluding the trade negotiations (Ye 2024b). Hence, because the negotiations were halted or were ongoing, the DESTA database did not include these cases. The social movement falling into this category included the Thai protest against the US–Thailand FTA in 2006, which significantly postponed Thailand’s trade agreement negotiations with the United States (The Washington Times 2006). Second, although the Mass Mobilization Protest Dataverse treated the goals of some protests as trade-oriented, their target was actually a bilateral investment treaty or anti-counterfeiting agreement. Therefore, after double-checking these with other sources, these cases were found to be different from the PTAs and were therefore excluded. Finally, coders in the DESTA database did not regard some economic agreements as PTAs. As a result, even though the Mass Mobilization Protest listed protest cases like Plan Puebla Panamá, the DESTA database did not provide relevant information on these treaties for the statistical analysis to be run.

The key explanatory variable was PTA depth. This variable was coded based on latent trait analysis (Dür, Baccini, and Elsig 2014; Hofmann, Osnago, and Ruta 2019), and the value of this continuous variable within the period of analysis ranged from -1.50 to 2.09. The other covariates controlled for the effects of treaty characteristics because they may influence social responses to PTA risks. These covariates include (1) whether these treaties are bilateral or multilateral; (2) whether the text contains investment, service, and intellectual property rights

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

	Count	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Anti-PTA Protest	533	0.017	0.129	0	1
PTA Depth	533	0.383	0.943	-1.5	2.09
Bilateral PTA	533	0.662	0.473	0	1
Investment Provision	533	0.486	0.500	0	1
Service Provision	533	0.373	0.484	0	1
Competition Provision	533	0.317	0.466	0	1
Intellectual Property Rights Provision	533	0.392	0.489	0	1
Observations	533				

provisions; and (3) whether PTAs involve a competition chapter (Dür and Elsig 2015). The bilateral treaty variable was coded as 1 if a PTA was signed between the two parties and 0 otherwise. The other treaty characteristics followed the same dummy coding. These treaty content variables are offered by the DESTA database (Dür, Baccini, and Elsig 2014). Notably, as most treaty-level variables in the DESTA database are dichotomous, including some of these factors in the models will cause a quasi-separation problem and fail to estimate the coefficients (King and Zeng 2001). For the same quasi-separation issue, this study does not address the temporal effects by creating signature year dummies. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of these variables.

Rare-event models were employed to test whether the depth of PTAs increased the likelihood of anti-trade protests. The rare-event models are suitable when there is a low probability of a given outcome (King and Zeng 2001). In the context of trade agreements, the occurrence of social movements is rare, as most trade negotiations can result in cooperative outcomes (Ye 2024a). This study's data supports this observation because the number of social protests against PTAs accounted for only 1.68% of the total number of successful PTAs concluded between 1990 and 2020. Even if the other ten protests were recorded in the Mass Mobilization Data Project Dataverse, the proportion of anti-PTA movements would rise to 3.49%, which still justifies the rare occurrence of social movements during states' trade agreement negotiations.

Empirical Findings

The primary results are summarized in Table 2. Both Models 1 and 2 provide evidence for the hypothesis that the depth of PTAs increases the likelihood of social protests against them. Model 1 shows the results without controlling for the confounding variables' effects. The coefficient of PTA depth was 2.06 at a 0.10 significance level. Model 2 demonstrates that the main effect holds when the influence of treaty characteristics is considered. However, although the magnitude of the key explanatory variable increases slightly from 2.06 to 2.42, the effect is still confirmed at the 0.10 significance level only.

Because it was difficult to interpret the coefficients using the rare-event models alone, changes in predicted probability were calculated using the "relogitq" command in STATA (King and Zeng 2001). All dummy variables were set as 1 and the mean of "PTA_depth" was used for the continuous variable. Using a 0.10 significance level, the result

Table 2. Results of Rare-Event Models

DV: Social Protests	Model 1	Model 2
PTA Depth	2.069* (1.88)	2.428* (1.83)
Bilateral PTA		0.121 (0.16)
Investment Provision		-1.382*** (-2.91)
Service Provision		0.302 (0.83)
Competition Provision		-0.793 (-0.90)
Intellectual Property Rights Provision		0.0494 (0.11)
Constant	-6.114*** (-3.58)	-4.944** (-2.42)
Observations	533	533

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 3. Anti-PTA Protests and the Depth of These PTAs

Multilateral PTA Name	PTA Depth	Bilateral PTA Name	PTA Depth
North American FTA	1.800	Peru–US Trade Promotion Agreement	1.867
Central American FTA	1.675	Korea–US FTA	1.937
Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area	-0.422	Panama–US Trade Promotion Agreement	1.800
		Japan–Thailand Economic Partnership Agreement	1.558
		Chile–Korea FTA	1.675
		Colombia–US Trade Promotion Agreement	1.937

Source: The authors assessed Information from the DESTA database and Mass Mobilization Data Project Dataverse.

indicated that the baseline probability of forming an anti-PTA movement was only approximately 0.0033. This number corresponds to the difficulty of organizing social protests during PTA negotiations. Nonetheless, holding other factors constant, the increase in the extent of “PTA_depth” from 0 to 1 significantly enhances the likelihood of triggering an anti-PTA protest by 0.0112. Given that the “PTA_depth” variable ranges from -1.50 to 2.09 in the period of analysis, I recalculated this substantive effect by setting “PTA_depth” from -1.5 to 2.1. The numeric interpretation of this result is that when the PTA commitment level deepens from the lowest (-1.5) to highest (2.1), the predicted probability of facing an anti-PTA protest increases by 0.1694. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the public has become increasingly concerned about and determined to initiate protests in association with higher levels of trade cooperation through PTAs.

Descriptive statistics supported the primary findings. Table 3 shows the nine anti-PTA protests and their depths. On average, the depth of the PTAs not facing protests ($n = 524$) was approximately 0.36. Nonetheless, the depth of the nine PTAs that experienced social protests was 1.53. This striking numerical difference suggests that the extent to which the anti-free-trade social movement erupts is contingent on the depth of the PTAs.

Conclusion

By synthesizing trade agreements and contentious politics scholarship, this study provides the first systematic analysis of why and when PTAs become contentious. The main argument is that PTAs with deeper commitments are more likely to experience anti-PTA social protests. Specifically, the first claim is that because PTAs benefit those who support free trade, those opponents of PTAs are more prone to organize collective action to fight the PTAs due to the fears of losing influence in the agenda-setting process. Second, deepened PTAs also make it more likely for free trade opponents to conduct framing to attract followers of the social movement. The results of the rare-event models provide adequate evidence for these claims and show a positive association between the depth and contention of PTAs.

This study contributes to the literature on trade negotiations in two ways: First, although scholars have begun to focus on the failure and instability of trade agreement bargaining (Dadush and Dominguez Prost 2023; Ye 2024a), few studies have addressed the conditions that make negotiations controversial. The findings of this study show that social resistance can be attributed to the content and design of PTAs. Second, this study enriches scholarly discussions on the triggers of social contention over free trade. Although it has been taken for granted that victims of free trade seek measures against PTAs (Milner 1999; Baccini, Pinto, and Weymouth 2017; Baccini 2019), this study reveals the extremely low likelihood of PTA aversion evolving into coordinated protests. Nevertheless, it still carries the policy implication that once a social movement becomes reality, the government will find it challenging to overcome domestic resistance and calls for protectionism.

Despite these contributions, future studies should seek to improve the utility of this study and its framework with greater data availability and better coding approaches. For example, since the unit of analysis was an episode, this study did not model the severity or scale of the anti-PTA protests. In fact, PTAs such as the North American and Central American FTAs have encountered more protests in multiple countries than other PTAs have. However, at the treaty level, simply counting the number of these protests for modeling can be misleading because multilateral PTAs inherently have a higher chance of facing more protests in multiple

countries than bilateral PTAs. Similarly, it would be risky to sum up the total number of protesters that occurred in different signatory countries or at different times because the contexts might differ. These limitations indicate that future research should seek to explain other variations in the severity and scale of anti-PTA social protests.

Notes

- 1 In different contexts, the public attitudes toward free trade can be differentiated based on different versions of economic nationalism (Park 2009). For example, the public in South Korea is divided along the line of anti-Japanese or anti-US sentiments. Political elites supporting the proliferation of FTAs claim that signing an FTA with the US can bolster Korea's economic development vis-à-vis Japan. In contrast, the activists opposing the FTA argue that seeking this FTA consolidates the US imperialism upon Korea (Park 2009).
- 2 Taking the Trans-Pacific Partnership for instance, uninformed Japanese people conceive of the distribution effects of this FTA through the news on partisan politics rather than on national economy. What's more, based on the Google Trend search engine query data, Naoi and Urata (2013) also demonstrate that the sources of information that the respondents trust are correlated with their attitude toward the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Those who trust internet materials significantly favor protectionism, while those who mainly rely on traditional newspapers to obtain information tend to support the TTP (Naoi and Urata 2013).

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优惠贸易协定的深度与争议

摘要: 本研究探讨了优惠贸易协定（PTAs）何时以及为何会引发争议。尽管新兴文献已关注贸易谈判的失败，但很少有研究解释反PTA抗议这一罕见但重要的现象。为了回答这个问题，本文认为承诺程度更深的PTA更容易引发社会抗议。本研究利用稀有事件模型，发现了PTA的深度与争议之间存在正相关关系的证据。结果表明，尽管国家有经济和政治激励寻求更深入的贸易合作，但此类决定更有可能面临国内阻力。

关键词: 自由贸易、贸易谈判、抗争政治、社会运动

특혜무역협정의 심화와 주요 논쟁

초록: 본 연구는 일부 특혜무역협정(PTA)이 논쟁의 대상이 되는 경우와 이유에 대한 문제를 살펴보았다. 무역 협상의 실패를 다룬 연구가 다소 있긴 하지만, 중요한 특혜무역협정 반대 시위를 설명한 연구는 거의 없는 실정이다. 연구 질문에 답하고자 본 논문은 약정 사항이 많은 특혜무역협정일수록 사회적 시위를 일으킬 가능성이 크다고 주장하였다. 본 연구는 회귀사건모형을 사용하여 특혜무역협정의 심화와 논쟁이 양(+)의 연관이 있다는 증거를 알게 되었다. 연구 결과 국가들은 서로 무역 협력을 심화시킬 경제·정치적 인센티브가 있지만, 이러한 결정은 국내 저항에 부딪칠 가능성이 높다는 점을 입증하였다.

핵심어: 자유 무역, 무역 협상, 정치 논쟁, 사회 운동

特惠貿易協定の深さと抗争

要旨: 本研究では、いつ、そしてなぜ一部の特惠貿易協定（PTA）が論争を呼ぶようになるのかという問題を取り上げる。最近の研究では貿易交渉の決裂に注目しているものの、反PTAデモの発生という稀でありながらも重要な事象について説明している研究はほとんどない。この問いに答えるため、本稿では、コミットメントレベルの深いPTAの方が社会運動を誘発させる可能性が高いことを主張する。レアイベント・モデルを用いることで、PTAの深さと抗争の間には正の関係性があることを示す証拠を見出す。結果からは、国家にはより深い貿易協力を求める政治経済的なインセンティブがあるものの、そのような決定は国内の抵抗に直面する可能性が高いことが示されている。

キーワード: 自由貿易、貿易交渉、抗争政治、社会運動

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