

Weekend Essay

Congress Loved Tariffs Long Before President 'Tariff Man' Trump

US legislators have historically preferred import barriers to free trade.

Illustration: Ishaq Fahim for Bloomberg



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As US President Donald Trump raises tariffs on imports from friends and foes alike, support is building in both parties to give Congress a greater role overseeing foreign trade. The president may be a self-proclaimed “tariff man” – but Congress, the thin goes on Capitol Hill, could rein in his protectionist instincts by asserting its right to approve new or increased duties on foreign goods.

Critics of Trump’s [bull-in-a-china-shop approach](#) should be careful what they wish for. Historically, most senators and representatives have zealously preferred higher import barriers to freer trade. They are unlikely to champion a more open US economy.

Congress’s protectionist inclinations go back to the country’s earliest days. The Constitution empowers the legislature to tax imports, and the very first Congress in exercised that power aggressively. It crafted duties both to raise revenue and to increase the cost of imported goods in order to protect US producers. A 50-cents-per-pair duty rendered imported boots less competitive with boots made from American hides by American bootmakers, many of whom had workshops in Philadelphia. A charge of 5 cents per pound of indigo preserved the domestic dye market for South Carolina plantation owners by pricing out indigo from British India. A tariff of 50 cents per 112 pounds of imported dried fish placated New England fishermen, while a levy of 56 cents per 112 pounds of unwrought steel aided New Jersey’s iron-and-steel industry.

Those tariffs were the new government’s main source of revenue, and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton felt they didn’t raise enough money. A year later, he introduced Congress a second bill increasing tariffs “for the discharge of the debts of the United States, and the encouragement and protection of manufactures.” Congress posed no objections to hiking the tariff on indigo to 25 cents per pound or the duty on imported steel to 75 cents per 112 pounds.



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