



ANDY BAKER

**PROFESSOR,
POLITICAL SCIENCE
PURDUE UNIVERSITY**

DOES TRADE BOOST SOFT POWER? EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FOR THE GENTLE COMMERCE HYPOTHESIS FROM MEXICO AND THE US

The notion that a country can boost its popularity among foreign mass publics—and thereby its global soft power—by increasing its trade flows holds a canonical place in the field of international relations. However, convincing evidence, and especially experimental evidence, of this alleged “gentle commerce” relationship is limited. We begin to address this empirical gap with three survey experiments conducted in Mexico and the US. We hypothesize that cueing respondents about their country’s dyadic trade flows with a named foreign country improves their opinions of that country. We also hypothesize that cueing respondents about their country’s exports to that country creates a larger positive effect than does cueing them about imports from that country. We find mixed evidence for the first hypothesis: Sometimes cueing about trade does make perceptions more favorable and sometimes it does not, though in our data we never find that trade cues worsen attitudes. In turn, we find consistent support for the second hypothesis, providing evidence of a mercantilist or “pop internationalist” logic to citizen thinking on the matter.

TIME

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