

Trade-offs in trade policy: What the public thinks and how they think about them

Viviane Gravey, Maria Savona, Dan Wincott and L. Alan Winters

Published 25 April 2023

Briefing Paper 3

Key points:

- New research into public attitudes to trade reveals that, when asked to rank the most important objective overall for trade policy, people valued economic growth.
- However, when asked about specific trade-offs, the majority prioritised workers' rights, human rights, data privacy and maintaining food standards over more trade.
- Analysis of the participants' reasoning, as they decided how to make the trade-offs proposed to them, reveals that fairness; UK, national and regional interest; and favouring long-term over short-term outcomes were key considerations.
- To help navigate the uncertainties and complexities inherent in trade policy, participants across all locations wanted more 'experts' to inform trade policy decisions.
- Participants wished governments to consult and consider the views of a broad range of groups over trade policy.
- Further research into public attitudes to trade policy could usefully explore the relationship between people's overall priorities for trade and their views on specific issues in trade policy.
- The complexity of trade policy issues also raises questions about how to present (and who presents) trade policy issues to the public because unless it is done in a way that respects the complexity, it will be seen as mere politicking.

The Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy (CITP) set out to consult widely about the shape of our five-year research programme in order to try to ensure that it covers issues of relevance not only to academics but also to the various parties interested in and affected by international trade policy. To that end we have discussed our agenda with the Trade Justice Movement, the British Chambers of Commerce, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, the trade units in all four UK administrations and a range of UK politicians. What we had not yet done was talk to the public directly. This Briefing Paper introduces ongoing research into public attitudes to trade policy, both describing it and suggesting some preliminary conclusions. It is based on deliberations in a series of "citizens' juries" which are described below.

Citizens' Juries

The CITP commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)'s Centre for Deliberative Research (CDR) to conduct a series of citizens' juries on potential UK trade policy scenarios in order to explore public attitudes towards the trade-offs that trade policy inevitably poses. In particular, we wanted to understand the choices that people would make in a number of trade policy trade-off scenarios and how they went about making those choices. Second, we wanted to understand whom they would trust to make and inform trade policy decisions.

In brief, the project convened five juries of around 20 people each which met five times to consider trade-offs in four areas of trade policy. They were introduced to information on the issues and trade-offs by CITP researchers in as even-handed a way as possible, had small-group discussions, with facilitators, about the trade-offs, voted on certain questions and recorded their reasoning for voting the way they did. [NatCen has published a report](#) describing the process and some preliminary findings which are based on the participants' voting notes and choices, informal summaries of their discussions and also on a brief survey taken before the juries had met and again after the whole process was complete.¹

This paper draws on the NatCen report and more detail on the voting patterns; it also offers some initial reflections by the CITP team. In addition to the summaries of the discussions, the small-group deliberations were recorded and, for the final workshop, transcribed; these resources will form the basis of deeper research by CITP over the next few months, which will extend and possibly qualify some of the preliminary conclusions of this paper.

We were not seeking snap judgements based just on what people (thought they) knew, nor to test policies for popularity nor even to determine which arguments swayed people one way or another on trade policy issues. Rather we sought to inform people about the details of certain policy challenges in as unbiased a way as possible, allowing them space and time to deliberate about the issues in small groups and then to say what they felt. Their preferences were of interest, of course, but so was the nature of their analyses and discussions of the issues. In short, we were seeking reasonably well-considered and well-informed judgements and to understand how they were reached.

¹ We are grateful to NatCen, particularly Ciaran Cummings, Ceri Davies and Duncan Grimes, for their excellent work on this exercise.

Details of the CITP Citizens' Juries, January- February 2023

The citizens' juries were held in Belfast, Bridgend, Doncaster, Paisley, and Reading over January and early February 2023. Each comprised about 20 members chosen to be representative of their local areas. We focussed on localities so that participants had at least some common experience and context. We do not consider the juries to be statistically representative of their broader regions or nations nor, in combination, the UK as a whole. They do give us a wide range of views and attitudes to inform policymaking.

Each jury had five workshops in total: four online of two and half hours each, and one face-to-face all-day session. In the online workshops, CITP researchers gave presentations about four key areas of trade policy as well as the likely outcomes of two different trade-policy decisions within them. During the final workshop, participants were invited to consider four specific trade policy decisions, each arising from one of the online workshops. In each case, they received information prepared by the CITP team on various aspects of the decisions, discussed their views, voted on some choices, made brief explanations for their votes, and reflected on the 'whom to trust' question. In addition, they completed a simple survey both before and after the entire jury process.

NatCen has published a report on the juries [ref] outlining the process and some preliminary findings based on the participants' notes and voting choices in the final session, informal summaries of their discussions by NatCen facilitators and the pre- and post-jury surveys. This paper draws on the NatCen report and more detail on voting patterns and it offers some initial reflections by the CITP team. In addition, the small-group discussions were recorded and, for the final workshop, transcribed; these resources will form the basis of deeper research by CITP over the next few months, which will extend and possibly qualify some of the preliminary conclusions of this paper. This process will include looking further into any differences between juries.

One danger with deliberative processes is that participants feel obliged to voice 'socially acceptable' views rather than their genuine feelings. This cannot be wholly ruled out, but a number of design features introduced by NatCen aimed to minimise it – namely, making it clear that all options involved difficult trade-offs; ensuring the anonymity of participants (first names only); allowing the groups enough time to get comfortable with each other; keeping the written (as opposed to verbal) explanations of their views private; facilitators encouraging consideration of alternative views; being rigorous that no option was ever presented as the 'best' or 'most acceptable' and ensuring that no CITP presenters were present in the discussions. Likewise, one can worry about self-selection into the sample, but substantial efforts were made to make the samples representative of their localities, although, of course, every participant was a volunteer.

These caveats are worth bearing in mind when reading the quantitative elements of our results. Deliberative research is fundamentally qualitative: the discussions serve to illuminate how people assess the trade-offs involved and how they reach their conclusions, while the surveys and the votes offer broad summaries of sentiment, not statistical samples on which to test hypotheses. The combination of the two provides a sound body of information on attitudes to trade-policy issues that can help in policy formation and presentation and in making future research more relevant to people's needs.

Trade-offs in trade policy: four illustrative areas

It is widely acknowledged that international trade is generally a positive-sum process whereby society as a whole benefits. However, nothing ensures that **everyone** automatically gains, and unless there are explicit steps to distribute the benefits from trade broadly there will be winners and losers. Moreover, such (re-)distributive policies may be difficult and expensive to organise and may have economic downsides themselves, and also need to be evidence-based and thus require detailed monitoring and evaluation of trade effects. Thus, a major challenge in designing any piece of trade policy is that it almost inevitably requires trade-offs between different interests. These trade-offs are what make trade policy contentious and exploring them was the main purpose of our citizens' juries. We introduced trade-offs to participants in terms of four areas, each discussed in one online session.²

1. *The impact of UK trade policy on the world*

As the first of the series, this session began with an introduction to the overall project, followed by background information on trade and the UK's position in world trade.

Following this introductory material, the session considered how economic, social and political objectives interact in trade practice and policy, with a focus on trade-offs and the role of the values that inform the choices made about trade policy. Two presentations were given: one on the relationship between human and workers' rights and trade policy, the other on the central role of trade in the rapid development of Covid-19 vaccines in 2020 and the global pattern of vaccine production and distribution.

Participants then considered a hypothetical trade agreement between the UK and India. Discussion focussed on questions of fairness in balancing potential economic costs and benefits for the UK and India on the one hand and protections for workers' rights in India on the other.

2. *Balancing trade between territories and sectors of the economy*

This session explained that trade policy impacts primarily on sectors of the economy, by, say, increasing competition from imports for particular sectors or winning easier access to foreign markets in particular sectors. Sectors are geographically distributed across the UK differently so sectoral differences in the impact of a policy can imply differences in regional impact. In addition, different sectors employ different sorts of labour and other inputs such as land, machinery and infrastructure, and so can have different effects on, for example, a particular skill group. This session focussed discussion around

- the (government) prediction that the UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) will cut output, income and jobs slightly in UK agriculture but boost them by more in business services, and
- the case for cutting the number of foreign students in the UK. While overseas students fund substantial amounts of university research and facilities, and thus subsidise UK students' time at university and also stimulate the economies of university towns, they also potentially increase pressure on housing and public services.

3. *Privacy and data-sharing*

This session explained the pros and cons of digital trade and cross-border data flows in the realm of medical data sharing.

The benefits and challenges of cross-border data flow ensuing from sharing medical data with countries with different levels of data protection are complex to assess. Following a discussion of these complexities, participants then considered two hypothetical trade policy scenarios. First, lowering trade barriers to cross-border data flows and facilitating health data sharing might allow improvements in digital health services, advances in medical treatments in areas that require the collection and analysis of high volumes of data, such as rare diseases, and facilitate innovations in health e.g. by pharmaceutical companies. However, such a trade

² To view video recordings of these presentations please see, Workshop materials on trade policy section: <https://citp.ac.uk/public-attitudes-to-trade>

policy decision might lead to sharing health data with countries with lower privacy and data protection standards than the UK, potentially resulting in privacy abuses, negative effects on those most at risk from this data being shared (such as those with long-term health conditions and refugees), the commercial profiling of consumers more generally, and the commercialisation of the NHS.

The second case related to the trade-off between the intellectual protection of companies' software secrets to promote more trade on the one hand, and the fact that this is likely to reduce the scope for official auditing and scrutiny of software for things like errors and racial bias, and hindering public interest regulation to protect ordinary people.

4. *Food and the environment*

This workshop commenced with a discussion of agriculture, trade and the environment, setting out the potential tension between cheap and wide-ranging food supplies and the challenges to food and environmental standards. It showed that UK food supplies depend heavily on trade but also how food imports may be associated with deforestation and higher carbon emissions. It also laid out the deep differences in attitudes between different stakeholders in the UK – the farmers' unions, environmental groups and retailers.

It then discussed issues surrounding pesticide use, noting the need to balance environmental damages (notably to key insects such as bees), the health damages to humans and the advantages they provide for food production. Imports tend to have pesticide residues in excess of UK standards more frequently than UK products and also a much smaller share of completely pesticide-free sales. Participants were invited to reflect on the fact that the UK bans certain pesticides for domestic use but nonetheless sells them in quite large volumes abroad. Moreover, residues of these pesticides then come back into the UK on imported foodstuffs.

What did the juries think?

Most of the information we currently have comes from the final all-day workshop, but we start briefly with two questions from the surveys – the pre- and post-surveys had pretty similar results. Asked to select the most important objective for trade agreements from among economic growth, combatting climate change, supporting human and labour rights or none of these, the majority prioritised growth. However, turning to trade *per se*, when asked to rank human rights versus more trade with developing countries, combatting climate change versus more trade overall, UK employees' rights over more jobs and balanced growth across the UK over maximising growth overall they chose the first of each pair. This may reflect a lack of belief that trade is important for growth. Alternatively, it may reflect that people's desire for growth and/or trade is materially qualified by distributional concerns. On the other hand, participants preferred to 'promote efficiency in the UK even if jobs are lost in some parts of the UK economy', so preferences are quite complex.

This possible tension between the different survey answers could reflect different phenomena and are a potential area for future CITP research. One is that people are inconsistent, and that further close questioning might elicit a 'last instance' answer. But research by political scientists on public attitudes suggests that the situation is more subtle than this: people do not necessarily have mutually consistent monotonically ordered preferences on these kinds of questions.

What was clear here is the difficulty participants had in deciding on complex issues. It showed up in participants' work on the hypothetical scenarios during the final workshops, and, indeed, in [other research on public attitudes to trade](#). This is a potentially important factor in considering how to structure and interpret public engagement over trade policy. For example, in two of our trade-off areas, participants tended to focus their discussion, and implicitly their decisions, on just one accessible aspect of the problem – health.

In the final workshop, participants were provided with information about one hypothetical trade-off in each area which was presented as the decision to be taken on accepting a section or clause in a trade deal.³ The trade-offs built on the issues discussed in the online sessions and involved both economic and non-economic outcomes. In each case, following initial discussion participants were asked to vote 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know' in response to each deal; they then discussed how they voted and eventually went on to repeat the process with a modified version of the same trade-off.

Trade and human rights

This concerned a hypothetical aspect of the prospective trade agreement between the UK and India. The participants were told that the deal would improve Indian workers' rights but have mixed economic outcomes for the UK and India. A majority of the jury participants prioritised the promotion of workers' rights abroad, suggesting that they thought that the UK should use trade to promote human rights abroad and were willing to accept higher consumer prices to achieve this. Their view was that the deal should be fair to both sides and prioritised long-term outcomes for workers' rights over lower consumer prices, which participants held to be short-term outcomes. The modified trade-off stated that India would lose economically from enforcing stronger rights for workers and this, understandably, resulted in a decline in support. In discussion there was significant doubt about whether any agreed human rights would actually be enforced, and this underpinned a significant 'don't know' vote, especially in the modified trade-off.

Balancing sectors and territories

Here, participants were asked whether they accepted one element of the recently signed UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement, imagining hypothetically that it could be separated from the rest of the deal. UK [Government analysis](#) predicts that the agreement will increase incomes and jobs in 'other business services' (things like legal work and accounting) but decrease them by about half the amount in agriculture. Business services tend to concentrate in the greater southeast of England,⁴ whereas agriculture lies mostly outside that region; business services also employ a higher proportion of women than farming. A small majority of our participants rejected the deal, prioritising concerns about intra-UK inequality over greater economic prosperity in total. The protection of agriculture on cultural/historical/security grounds was advocated by some, but territorial fairness appeared more prominently in participants' reasoning. The modified deal assumed that, holding everything else the same, all the jobs created in business services would lie outside the southeast; this eliminated the majority for 'no', inducing a nearly equal split between acceptance and rejection.

Privacy and data-sharing

The juries considered a hypothetical trade deal that would make it easier to transfer health data abroad to countries with lower data privacy standards than the UK. This would potentially benefit health research, services and treatments, but would risk data privacy abuses. Assessing the risk of sharing data underpinned participants' decisions to accept or reject this deal. All participants wanted to support medical research, so their trade-off depended primarily on their appetite for risk on data privacy. Precisely half of the participants voted for the agreement in its initial form, with a majority of the others opting for 'don't know' rather than 'no'. The 'don't know' groups often wanted more detail about the possible deal before they felt they could decide. When the trade-off was modified to suggest significantly higher potential medical benefits, a significant majority voted for the deal.

Food standards

Participants next considered (again in hypothetical isolation) a scenario in which the UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement decreased the price of imported food (which would benefit consumers but hit certain UK farmers) but also increase the risk that the food would contain pesticides banned in UK food production. Citing potential health risks, a significant majority were unwilling to compromise on residual pesticide levels for goods admitted

³ We explained that trade agreements did not generally come so conveniently packaged that a critical trade-off resided in only one clause. However, we believed this would be a useful fiction to help keep discussion focussed.

⁴ This comprises the Standard English (NUTS 1) regions London, South-East England and East of England

to the UK market despite the potential benefit of reduced food prices. Participants expressed a high level of trust in current UK standards for food, and many said they were willing to pay more for these to be upheld. They had less faith in Australian standards/enforcement. The modified trade-off promised food imported from Australia would meet the English and Welsh standards even if that permitted lower standards than Northern Ireland and Scotland currently maintain. This elicited a somewhat greater degree of acceptance but also led to a doubling of the 'don't know' vote. Participants' views were substantially driven by their assessment of the health risk and their levels of trust in UK or Australian food standards and their administration.

How did people reach their decisions?

The preliminary analysis of participants' reasoning behind their decisions suggests four commonly used yardsticks against which people measured possible outcomes. It seems reasonable to assume that the same considerations will figure in assessments of other trade policy trade-offs in the 'real world'.

Fairness

Participants generally considered fairness in trade deals. They were willing to accept some reduction in economic gains provided it promoted territorial fairness through, say, the distribution of jobs in the UK, or international fairness through improving workers' rights abroad. When discussing food standards and the use of medical data, they were keen to avoid certain populations being treated unfairly, such as farmers or people with particular medical conditions.

'Fairness' is implicit in all trade-offs – is it fair that one group faces losses in order that another can gain – and so it was an implicit question in all the scenarios presented by CITP researchers. However, it appeared in different guises in different cases and so the frequency with which it cropped up in discussions and the ways in which juries voted lends credibility to the idea that it is central in the minds of many UK residents.

UK national interest

A discussion about the best interests of the UK featured in every scenario. This was expressed in terms of both economic outcomes, e.g. through growth, jobs, and prices, and non-economic outcomes such as health and national security. In participant voting forms, national interest was often expressed through choosing an option that benefitted everyone in the UK (e.g., higher food standards), or benefitted more UK citizens (e.g., creating the highest number of jobs), but only rarely was economic growth or prosperity *per se* name-checked.

Territorial and local interest

Devolved, regional and local interests were identified through participants discussing the protection of local products, jobs, and communities. Similar ideas emerged in participant voting forms when the scenarios discussed impacts on local industries such as agriculture and business services. In making decisions, participants were explicitly asked to consider both national and regional dimensions and they seemed to do this faithfully, with neither one nor the other entirely dominating.

Long-term impact

Participants often prioritised outcomes that they understood to be long-term over those that they considered more short-term, and they were often explicitly willing to bear limited short-term pain for long-term gain. They were not provided with information about the timescales of different impacts, but these, nonetheless, emerged as a key dimension in which they assessed complex trade-offs. Factors such as human rights, standards, the environment, and jobs were consistently considered longer-term outcomes, whereas economic outcomes such as consumer prices were consistently considered short-term. This is an interesting observation *per se*, but it is also intriguing because participants' identification of effects as short- or long-term did not always accord with what trade analysts would say.

The desire to achieve both economic growth and non-economic objectives by balancing the principles of fairness, national and regional interests, and long-term outcomes in trade policy was also reflected in the pre- and post-surveys. Growth was the most popular priority for trade agreements both before and after the juries, but so was preferring ‘balanced growth’ over ‘overall growth’ in the question setting them up as alternatives.

Whom to ask and whom to trust

Across all scenarios, a significant number of participants were unsure of their views and selected the ‘don’t know’ option when asked to decide about these complex trade-offs. This uncertainty compromised their ability to assess and balance risks such as the probability of pesticides causing cancer. They were similarly uncertain about social and political issues such as how the UK could/would monitor any promised improvement of Indian workers’ rights in a deal. NatCen notes that, as has been seen in other public deliberations, participants sought to resolve this uncertainty by access to expertise. In our case, participants across all locations wanted ‘experts’ to inform trade policy decisions, and appeared to distinguish two types of expert in terms of the information they can offer (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive within an individual):

- Experts with ‘on the ground’ experience relevant to a trade-policy decision who can offer ‘real world’ experience. Participants wanted businesses and workers, for example, to inform trade policy because their real-world perspective offers lived experience of how deals are likely to impact them day to day.
- Independent specialists who provide trusted data on risks and benefits, such as scientists and academics. These were held able to provide honest assessments of the risks involved in things like pesticides and data sharing, as well as better-informed and less-biased assessments of the likely impacts of each deal. In this context, independence was understood as not gaining financially from a decision.

Participants wished governments to consult and consider the views of a broad range of groups over trade policy. The most popular choices in the pre- and post-surveys were businesses and the public, but it was notable that between the two surveys support for Westminster MPs and the devolved executives increased and support for civil society and the trades unions decreased. This may reflect the fact that, prior to the juries, most participants had not appreciated the complexity of trade policymaking and the unavoidable need to balance different interests.

Our juries were not asked about and did not offer a view on, how such consultations could be organised or how the expertise they sought might be harnessed; nor how the biases and interests to which consultees and experts may be subject might be managed. These are topics that will be addressed in future CITP research.

During the final workshops, participants were asked whom they trust to make decisions on trade policy. They were presented with a list of options, and across all locations, the most popular were the UK Government and international organisations.⁵ Many caveated their preference for UK Government with the statement that they do not trust the government or politicians in general, and facilitators’ summaries of discussions suggested that preferences for the UK Government may reflect recognition of where power currently lies, *rather* than a reflection of whom the participants would prefer to make decisions. Similarly to the issue of experts, the preferences for international organisations may reflect a belief that standards and the arbitration of disputes about them should be well-informed and unbiased.

⁵ The full list was as follows: local government, devolved national government, UK Government, international trade organisations (like the European Union or the World Trade Organisation), and the general public.

Conclusion and future research

The citizens' juries are part of the CITP's commitment to consult widely and they are, as noted above, yet to be interrogated in more detail. However, the preliminary results discussed here suggest a number of issues that might be subject to further research and/or reflection.

The complexity of trade policy issues shone through in this research, as it has elsewhere. This raises questions about how to present (and who presents) trade policy issues to the public because unless it is done in a way that respects the complexity, it will be seen as mere politicking. In particular, the participants seemed anxious to receive balanced and informed information about policies and to have some degree of assurance that decision-makers have also received and internalised that information. Reflection on suitable institutional structures to deliver on these goals would seem to be useful.

Part of the background to such a reflection would be consideration of who is consulted at present and how: this forms part of the CITP agenda already but may benefit from extension. Sorting out expertise from interest is a major challenge and potential danger in any consultative process, and being aware that they can get confounded is a useful starting point.

The outcome that people want trade agreements that promote trade in general, but frequently favour other priorities over increasing trade in specific instances raises important challenges in interpreting the results. As noted above, people may not have mutually consistent monotonically ordered preferences, so further research into public attitudes and trade policy could usefully explore the relationship between people's overall priorities for trade and their views on specific issues in trade policy. Relatedly, the consideration of both the original and modified deals in each of the trade-offs was designed to map some of the drivers of public views on trade policy within a paradigm – economics – which tends to presume consistency. Further experiments within this paradigm may also be useful.

In this paper, we have made nothing of territorial differences in approaches to or decisions about trade policy. They were not our focus in the initial report and, although NatCen's report deals with them briefly, we intend to study any differences that can be identified from our deeper engagement with the juries' deliberations.

One fairly frequent response in the juries was to worry about whether commitments to change and enforced regulations would actually be delivered. This is partly a matter of overall trust in political systems, which is currently low. However, the situation may be improved by institutional changes in the UK that would mandate reviews of trade policy changes (notably free trade agreements) including implementation. The EU currently has provision for such reviews although there is scope to improve on their content.

The strength of the message about fairness is clearly of relevance to actual policymaking and, indeed, to the political processes surrounding it. But it also challenges researchers to understand it more clearly. For example, what do people consider 'fair' – equality of effect, no losers, compensating losers, avoiding losses exceeding a certain threshold? It also raises the question of how the public would trade one unfairness against another. As a first step, our exercise considered trade-offs essentially one at a time, but there is clearly room to ask, for example, how to trade the risk of data-sharing against the territorial distribution of employment gains. Both this and the mapping of the preferences on single issues alluded to above may call for further deliberative research.