What If America's Trade Policy Was Steadfast and Reliable?

It's time for Congress to reclaim its role — not to constrain the executive branch, but to steady the ship.

Imagine a Different Approach

Imagine if U.S. trade policy didn't reset every four years.

If farmers, manufacturers, and global trading partners could rely on a strategy that reflected American values — and held steady, regardless of party. If tariffs weren't introduced as a surprise or a political tool, but deployed as part of a broader, long-term strategy.

That's not a fantasy. It's how the Founders designed trade to work.

And it's time we brought that vision back.

Trade Policy Isn't Just Unpredictable — It's Unstable

America's trade system has become reactionary. And not by accident.

Since the 20th century, Congress — the only branch granted constitutional power over trade — has gradually handed control to the executive branch. Presidents have imposed tariffs unilaterally under statutes like Section 232 (national security) and Section 301 (retaliation against unfair trade).

It wasn't always this way.

Until the 1930s, Congress maintained active control over tariffs. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, often cited as a contributor to the Great Depression, led to retaliatory measures from dozens of countries. It also sparked a decades-long rethinking of how trade policy should be structured.

But instead of creating balance, we created imbalance: Presidents got speed. Congress became a bystander.

Today, one individual can dramatically reshape global trade with no congressional approval. No open debate. No economic guardrails.

“When Congress steps back, trade becomes reactionary — and the world takes note.”

The Consequences Are Real

“Trade wars aren’t a strategy. They’re a symptom of a broken process.”

These aren’t hypotheticals. They’ve happened before — under both parties:

- In 1971, President Nixon imposed a sudden 10% import surcharge in response to global currency pressures — sending shockwaves through international trade and ending the Bretton Woods system.
- In 2002, President George W. Bush imposed steel tariffs under Section 201. Within months, U.S. manufacturers began shedding jobs, the World Trade Organization ruled the tariffs illegal, and the EU prepared retaliatory measures. The policy was reversed in less than two years.
- In 2009, President Obama enacted a 35% tariff on Chinese tires. U.S. tire jobs increased, but economists estimate American consumers paid over $1.1 billion more in the following year.

These examples — and others — reveal a deeper issue: When Congress steps back, trade policy becomes reactionary.

For a broader timeline of key actions and consequences, see *Historical Tariff Actions & Their Consequences* at the end of this article.

And the symptoms persist:

- Countries like China have imposed 25%–50% retaliatory tariffs
- Markets react to headlines instead of long-term policy
- Strategic industries are caught in the middle, with no time to adjust
- Allies don’t know where America will stand — in four years or four months
- Businesses shorten their planning horizons, avoiding long-term investments

It’s not just that our system is unstable — it’s that the world knows it is.

What the Constitution Says — And Why It Still Matters

“Congress shall have Power… To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations.”
— *U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 8, Clause 3*

That's not ceremonial language. It's design.

Congress was intended to guide trade policy — not to micromanage every tariff, but to ensure a consistent, nationally backed strategy that couldn't be easily politicized.

Instead, the policy now shifts with each administration.

That's not sustainable. It's dangerous.

Three Steps to Rebuilding Trust — and Steadying the Ship

To restore long-term credibility — and support this and future Presidents — Congress must:

1. Reclaim its constitutional role in shaping trade policy
2. Set clear guardrails for executive action — not to limit bold decisions, but to ensure strategic intent
3. Act swiftly to restore predictability before the damage deepens

This isn't about partisanship.

It's about institutional repair.

And it's long overdue.

This Isn't About Who's in Office. It's About How We Govern.

Trade policy shouldn't change based on headlines, popularity shifts, or personal style.

It should reflect long-term national interests — regardless of party.

We don't need to make Congress dominant.

We just need it present — and accountable.

Join the Call

We've launched a petition urging Congress to reclaim its constitutional role in trade — not to create more red tape, but to build a better system:

- One that's strategic

- One that's steady
- One that makes America trusted again

Add your name: https://chng.it/BTGF8FNVzp

Historical Tariff Actions & Their Consequences

This timeline illustrates how executive-led trade actions — from both parties — have led to instability or unintended outcomes.

1930 – Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act
Triggered global retaliation; global trade dropped 66% by 1934.

1971 – Nixon's 10% import surcharge
Unilateral move disrupted global trade; ended Bretton Woods system.

1993 – NAFTA (Clinton era)
Enforcement and negotiation power consolidated in executive branch.

2002 – Bush's steel tariffs (Section 201)
WTO ruled illegal; EU threatened retaliation; repealed in 2003.

2009 – Obama's tire tariffs on China
U.S. tire jobs rose; U.S. consumers paid an estimated $1.1B more for tires the following year.

2010s – Section 301 expansion
Paved way for broader unilateral enforcement of trade retaliation, without needing new approval from Congress

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Let's fix what's broken — and build something steadier.

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