

Reckless Rhetoric? Compliance Pessimism and International Order in the Age of Trump

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How do leaders react to other states' apparent violations of international laws and norms? Existing scholarship focuses on protective actions that help preserve institutional health, whether through punishment or information manipulation. However, we argue that leaders like Donald Trump who do not strongly support existing rules and laws may highlight rule violations, which can create pessimism about overall compliance and lead to additional defections. We first show how our argument follows from a simple adaptation of an extant formal model, and then we evaluate observable implications in the international trade domain. We analyze President Trump's rhetoric regarding trade discrimination compared to past presidents, finding that he has fostered perceptions of discriminatory foreign trade practices despite fewer actual violations. We conclude with implications for the future of the international order, explaining why these actions likely reduce regime resilience.

Recent challenges to the liberal international order have sparked widespread debate about institutional resiliency, with many critics worrying that Donald Trump's presidency endangers specific institutions and the broader rules-based system (see, e.g., Colgan and Keohane 2017; Deudney and Ikenberry 2018; Ikenberry 2017; Patrick 2017). Trump's penchant for rhetorical broadsides against many norms and institutions, typified by his performances at public rallies and on Twitter, have sharpened this concern. Yet Trump is not the first leader to use the bully pulpit to criticize institutions. Moreover, the liberal international order has seemingly remained resilient so far. This raises several questions: What about Trump's presidency is unique compared to past American presidents? Is his rhetoric really very different from that of past leaders? If it is, what effects might Trump have on international cooperation and the international order over time and through what mechanisms?

Existing scholarship provides limited insight into these questions, as it largely focuses on the emergence of new institutions, the path-dependent maintenance of existing regimes, and the determinants of individual states' compliance (e.g., Axelrod and Keohane 1985; Dai 2005; Keohane 1984;

Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Mitchell 1994; Simmons 1998). However, we gain traction on these issues by building on Carnegie and Carson (2018), in which we argue that an important determinant of defections from international norms and laws is a state's perception of system-wide noncompliance. Specifically, we show that pessimism about compliance rates can encourage a cascade of defections as states rush for the exits. In contrast, optimism can bolster regime resiliency, insulating regimes from periodic shocks. If states seek to protect institutions, information manipulation can prevent *compliance pessimism*, or widely shared beliefs that noncompliance is common.

We adapt this theoretical framework to analyze the effects of Donald Trump's presidency, which seems to challenge the common assumption that states value cooperation-enhancing institutions. Empirically, we test whether Trump's rhetoric differs from that of past presidents, while accounting for underlying economic trends. Theoretically, we show how this behavior can endanger international order by encouraging compliance pessimism. We focus our analysis on the international trade domain, as trade has been a key issue of President Trump's presidency that has sparked large debates in the

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United States and abroad and thus represents an important and salient domain to study. We demonstrate that Trump has a unique proclivity for drawing attention to violations of trade norms and laws and argue that this has begun to erode confidence in the trade regime and entice other states to violate trade rules. While our conclusions about the effects of Trump's rhetoric are necessarily speculative, they are informed by our theoretical model as well as recent events. Moreover, while we focus on trade, we expect our theoretical insights to apply to other issues in which the Trump administration has drawn attention to noncompliance, such as climate change and arms control.

This article extends and revises a growing body of research on international cooperation and institutions that relaxes the dyadic assumptions of the standard prisoners' dilemma to understand systemic aspects of cooperation and institutional health (Snidal 1985). Recent efforts have drawn on a variety of methods (Jung and Lake 2011; Kinne 2013; Lupu and Voeten 2012) to study phenomena like diffusion, contagion, and precedent that have systemic implications (Neumayer and Plümper 2010). Moreover, we advance related scholarship on the sources of international norm decay, including technological shocks, the availability of replacement norms (Panke and Petersohn 2012), and lapses in domestic political buy-in (Bailey 2008).¹ Theorizing when states highlight rule violations also allows us to build on literature that examines the role of systemic compliance concerns in decisions by international organizations.² Finally, understanding the impact of rhetoric on perceived compliance rates sheds light on whether contemporary challenges represent cheap talk or reckless rhetoric.

THEORY

How do leaders differ in their propensity to highlight violations of international norms, and what is the relationship between such claims and institutional health? On the one hand, official rhetoric that exposes rule breaches can increase pressure on governments to reverse prohibited activity by imposing normative and reputational costs. This logic motivates the creation of formal and informal institutions to better monitor compliance (e.g., Dai 2005; Keohane 1984; Koremenos et al. 2001; Mitchell 1994) and naming-and-shaming campaigns in areas like human rights (e.g., Hafner-Burton 2008; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Murdie and Davis 2012). On the other hand, research in sociology and psychology suggests that re-

vealing that the actual rate of rule violations is higher than previously thought can erode other social actors' confidence in overall compliance. In such cases, more information may not be better, as the negative impact of such information on additional defections has been documented in studies of tax noncompliance (Wenzel 2005), binge drinking on college campuses (Borsari and Carey 2001), and the sociology of deviance (Goffman 1959; Simmel 1950).

In Carnegie and Carson (2018), we present a formal theoretical framework for analyzing three ideal types of states: a rule violator, a state with privileged knowledge of the violation, and a third state that is unaware of the original violation and decides whether to violate the rules in response. The model is designed to underscore information asymmetry. The state that directly observes the initial violation can influence the uninformed state's beliefs about the regime and its choice to violate the rules or not. Publicizing violations thus raises awareness but risks triggering pessimism. In its original context, our theory assumes that the informed state values an effective international order. As such, it often elects to withhold its information to protect the regime.³ In short, a state with the power to focus attention on rule violations can obfuscate them to inoculate a regime from threatening incidents.

While originally applied to the nuclear domain, our theoretical framework is readily adapted to the trade arena where violations are often difficult to establish. A simple tariff violation may be clear enough. Yet modern trade discrimination typically takes the form of nontariff barriers. For example, countries can impede foreign access and promote exports by dumping goods at below-market rates, subsidizing industries to gain an unfair market advantage, or applying environmental, health, or other standards that favor domestic production. Whether these constitute violations of their obligations is frequently unclear, since such a determination depends on private information including contract details, difficult-to-determine market fundamentals, and other factors. Such actions thus tend to go undetected by domestic and international audiences, who do not pay much attention to potential violations unless they result in a high-profile trade dispute or are heavily publicized (Rho and Tomz 2017). States may rely on the WTO to adjudicate their disputes, but they often do not since such disputes are costly and time consuming. Thus, in the face of thousands of potential annual violations, states can choose to investigate and call attention to a given partner's unfair trading practices or not.

An informed state seeking to protect a regime has incentives to withhold information and minimize the attention paid to

1. For earlier work focusing on the conditions and processes of norm emergence, see Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), Hyde (2011), and Risse-Kappen, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999).

2. See, e.g., research on judicial economy and controversial rulings in the World Trade Organization (WTO; Busch and Pelc 2010).

3. For other reasons to withhold information, see Carnegie and Carson (forthcoming).

violations, especially when failing to do so would foster compliance pessimism. Here we loosen this assumption to ask what happens if a leader does not seek to protect an existing legal-normative order. Indeed, leaders clearly differ in their enthusiasm for and propensity to work through international laws and institutions. Some prefer to use unilateral power to try to attain their goals, while others prefer to modify or upend extant norms and laws. This adaptation simply requires altering the informed state's utility function and reevaluating its strategic incentives in equilibrium. Specifically, the informed state could either lack a "regime health bonus" or even receive a "regime health penalty."

A straightforward implication of this change is that publicizing trade violations is useful as a tactic of disruption. At a minimum, if the informed state does not value a regime, it has little incentive to ignore or conceal violations even if there is a risk that doing so will cause reactive violations. Put differently, this change shifts the informed state's equilibrium strategy from obfuscation under some conditions to information revelation under all conditions. Such a leader should thus use the spotlight frequently, which can encourage compliance pessimism and weaken the resiliency of the regime.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

We now investigate whether Trump exemplifies the kind of leader just discussed. If so, we would expect him to highlight noncompliance with international trade more frequently than leaders who value the regime, holding actual violations constant. However, we remain agnostic about whether such a leader would spotlight violations intentionally in order to undermine the trade regime or simply fail to hide them because of apathy about maintaining these norms. Our theory applies equally to either type of leader; moreover, the creation of compliance pessimism is interesting even if a leader like Trump does not anticipate it as a consequence of his actions.

We first discuss anecdotal evidence that suggests that Trump does not seek to protect the status quo trade regime and, instead, may wish to revise it. We then analyze Trump's language about trade violations, showing that Trump-era speeches have more frequent instances of negative claims about trade discrimination compared to those of earlier presidents. We also analyze data regarding underlying trade violations, which suggest that this rhetorical shift is not a response to new circumstances; in fact, the number of other countries' trade violations has been lower during Trump's presidency than it was during Obama's.

Trump's critique of the trade regime

Trump does not appear to highly value the trade regime. Indeed, even before taking office and throughout his time as

president, Trump has consistently criticized existing norms of free trade and extant trade deals. Many accounts indicate that Trump thinks that trade protection is good for America, generally speaking. For example, "coming back from the G20 summit, Trump was editing an upcoming speech with Porter. Scribbling his thoughts in neat, clean penmanship, the president wrote, 'TRADE IS BAD'" (Woodward 2018, 208). Moreover, those that the president appointed to key trade positions also support increased trade restrictions. For instance, "On July 17, Lighthizer and Navarro brought a large poster to show Trump in the Oval Office, a brightly colored collection of boxes and arrows titled 'The Trump Agenda Timeline.' It was a vision of a protectionist Trump trade agenda with 15 projected dates to start renegotiations or take action on the South Korea KORUS trade deal, NAFTA, and to launch investigations and actions regarding aluminum, steel and automobile parts" (142).⁴

This attitude is also reflected in the administration's consistent undermining of existing trade rules and agreements, such as when Trump told his advisors, "Get out of NAFTA. Get out of KORUS. And get out of the WTO. We're withdrawing from all three" (Woodward 2018, 264). Indeed, Trump has consistently argued that the WTO is biased against the United States and has weakened the WTO by blocking justices from sitting on the Appellate Body. He often tweets that "the WTO is unfair to U.S." (April 6, 2018) and has frequently used protectionism for leverage, regardless of whether this runs afoul of the WTO's rules. For example, he tweeted, "Tariffs will make our country much richer than it is today. Only fools would disagree. We are using them to negotiate fair trade deals and if countries are still unwilling to negotiate they will pay us vast sums of money in the form of Tariffs. We win either way" (August 4, 2018, 19:58).

Trump's trade rhetoric

Of course, other presidents have also criticized the WTO and norms of free trade. While many scholars and members of the media characterize Trump's attitude as a departure from his predecessors, we have little systematic evidence that this is the case and, if so, how it differs. We therefore analyze several US presidents' rhetoric regarding trade and also discuss preliminary evidence from Trump's tweets and other behaviors.⁵ Trump's propensity to publicize cheating and unfairness is important to establish because if Trump does so more than his predecessors did, our theory expects that his rhetoric will

4. These views may be in part due to Trump's focus on trade deficits (Irwin 2018).

5. Our results are merely descriptive and should not be interpreted causally (e.g., Carnegie and Samii 2018).

contribute to compliance pessimism and encourage further trade violations going forward.⁶

To conduct our analysis, we used Python to scrape presidential documents from the American Presidency Project (APP) archives (<http://presidency.proxied.lsit.ucsb.edu/>), retrieving a corpus of documents for George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. There are 23 categories of documents, including everything from campaign documents to convention speeches to inaugural addresses.⁷ We counted the number of speeches in which presidents use the word “trade” and created word frequencies, as well as the proportion of speeches in which this term was used. We also counted sentences in which “trade” was used, since presidents often discuss many subjects within a given speech. From this we constructed word frequency lists.

Since we are interested in the ways in which Trump may differ from his predecessors, we extract the top 100 words that occur in sentences that contain the word “trade” for each of the past three presidents and then list the words that appear in Trump’s top 100 words that do not appear in speeches by the other two presidents. While many words that often accompany discussions of trade occur in all three presidents’ speeches—such as “country,” “job,” “United,” “States,” “economic,” “worker,” “investment,” and “business”—30 words are totally unique to Trump. These are shown in table 1, along with the frequency with which they occur.

These words can be grouped into two basic categories: words that indicate an unfair deal or cheating, and those that indicate demands to change such behavior. Importantly, he privileges these words despite the decrease in actual trade violations from Obama’s presidency to Trump’s, as demonstrated subsequently. The former category includes “deficits,” “terrible,” “massive,” “manufacturing,” “unfair,” “bad,” “worst,” “Hillary,” and “Clinton.” Note that we include “deficits” in this category because Trump most often discusses deficits as evidence of trade deals’ unfairness, we include “manufacturing” because Trump points to this sector to demonstrate harm from unfair trade practices, we include “massive” because it typically

Table 1. Words That Appear Only in Trump’s Speeches

| Word | Frequency | Word | Frequency |
|--------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
| Deficit | 155 | Border | 29 |
| Great | 54 | First | 29 |
| Terrible | 46 | South | 29 |
| Foreign | 46 | Manufacturing | 27 |
| Clinton | 41 | Unfair | 27 |
| Reciprocal | 41 | End | 27 |
| Relationship | 40 | Military | 26 |
| Regulation | 36 | Take | 24 |
| NAFTA | 35 | Worst | 23 |
| Renegotiate | 34 | Practice | 23 |
| Massive | 33 | Plan | 22 |
| Immigration | 33 | Stop | 22 |
| Mexico | 31 | Ever | 21 |
| Hillary | 31 | Bad | 21 |
| Reform | 30 | Dollar | 20 |

refers to massive harm due to unfair trade, and we include “Hillary” and “Clinton” because Trump often blames her for bad trade deals. The second category includes the following words: “great,” “reciprocal,” “relationship,” “regulation,” “renegotiate,” “reform,” “border,” “first,” “end,” “take,” “plan,” “stop,” “ever,” “NAFTA,” “Mexico,” and “foreign.” “Great” is included because Trump often wishes to renegotiate deals to make America great again, as well as “first” because of Trump’s typical references to America coming first in new trade deals.⁸ We obtain similar results using bigram and trigram analyses, although we do not present these here because of space constraints.

Reading the context in which these words appear, we see that Trump uses them to accuse countries of violating both norms of fairness and reciprocity, as well as the letter of the law. Regarding the former, the norm of reciprocity in particular is a key principle that is enshrined under the WTO, and Trump commonly claims that countries have abandoned it. He believes that “right now our trade . . . is not free, and it’s not reciprocal.”⁹ He claims that America has provided many trade benefits to other countries without receiving them in return, and he calls for countries to “immediately address the unfair trade practices.”¹⁰ This represents an important component of his focus on trade deficits: he argues that these deficits indicate that the United States is not being treated in

6. If a country changes its behavior in response to accusations of cheating, then the accusations might not undermine trade norms. However, many countries are retaliating instead. See Bown and Kolb (2018).

7. The full list of categories is as follows: campaign documents, congressional, convention speeches, correspondents association, elections and transitions, eulogies, farewell addresses, fireside chats, inaugural addresses, interviews, miscellaneous remarks, news conferences, opposition party responses, oral address, party platforms, post-presidential remarks, presidential nomination acceptance addresses, Saturday addresses, spoken addresses and remarks, state dinners, state of the union addresses, state of the union messages, and weekly addresses. We drop press releases since they may not have been written/spoken by the president.

8. Words that did not fit neatly into a given category include “immigration,” “dollar,” “military,” “practice,” and “South.”

9. Donald Trump, “Remarks to United States and Japanese Business Leaders in Tokyo, Japan,” November 6, 2017, APP.

10. Donald Trump, “Remarks at a Business Event with President Xi Jinxing of China in Beijing, China,” November 9, 2017, APP.

a reciprocal fashion, although his understanding of reciprocity differs from the WTO's understanding (Crowley 2003).¹¹

Statements that fall in the latter category—accusations of countries breaking the letter of the law—also occur frequently. For instance, it is notable that Trump uses the word “cheat” far more than his predecessors when talking about trade, although this did not make it into the list of Trump's top 100 words. While Bush used it once, and Obama used it four times, Trump referred to cheating 14 times despite having a much smaller corpus of documents than the other two presidents.¹² Moreover, Trump's usage of the word “cheat” tends to implicate many countries, rather than just one or two, creating the perception of widespread problems. Examples include statements such as, “On trade, we are going to end the international abuse, the foreign cheating, and the one-sided rules that govern NAFTA and the World Trade Organization” and Trump's frequent promise to “crack down on foreign countries that cheat, of which there are many.”¹³

This pattern is found elsewhere as well; for example, Trump also uses Twitter to create the impression of widespread cheating. Most of Trump's tweets about trade since he took office (130/148) refer to unfair trade or other countries cheating on trade norms and laws.¹⁴ These tweets say something similar to: “After many decades fair and reciprocal Trade will happen!” (June 9, 2018). Or, “We cannot keep a blind eye to the rampant unfair trade practices against our Country!” (March 14, 2018, 14:37). Moreover, he makes cheating seem particularly pervasive by targeting a variety of important trading entities including the European Union (EU), China, Mexico, Canada, Japan, and the G7.¹⁵ This comes in addition to his attacks on Brazil, India,

and Asian countries more generally in other forums.¹⁶ Indeed, his administration states that it is going “country by country, and product by product” looking for evidence of “cheating” (*Times of India* 2017).

Finally, an additional source of evidence that Trump breaks with the past is his effort to reclassify long-standing practices as protectionism that were not classified as such under previous presidents. For example, Wilbur Ross, Trump's choice for commerce secretary, highlighted these efforts in areas including the EU's reticence to import US beef because of concerns about mad cow disease, China's support for state-owned enterprises, environmental standards for cars, delays at ports, and others. He stated, “While the U.S. hasn't attacked these intricate relationships . . . the Trump administration will be ‘very scrupulous’ at looking into the matter” (Egan 2017).¹⁷ Indeed, Trump has encouraged the view that he is different from his predecessors, stating, “I wish previous administrations in my country saw what was happening and did something about it” (Restuccia and Tatarski 2017).

Trade discrimination trends

We now check whether the increase in accusations of cheating and unfair practices simply reflects an increase in discriminatory foreign trade practices. To do so, we use data from the Global Trade Alert database on the number of outstanding trade violations in the world. We first present graphs of the raw data. These data begin in 2009, so we compare trade violations under the Obama administration (shown in gray) to those under the Trump administration (shown in black). On the *x*-axis, we display the number of days into office for each president, and on the *y*-axis we show the number of non-US violations, measured as a 14-day rolling mean. Figure 1 in-

11. For the importance of reciprocity to Trump, see, e.g., White House (2018).

12. We have only two years worth of documents for Trump versus eight years worth of documents for the other two presidents.

13. Donald Trump, “Remarks at a Rally at Berglund Center in Roanoke, Virginia,” September 24, 2016, and “Remarks to the National Association of Manufacturers,” September 29, 2017, APP.

14. The remaining tweets are about unrelated topics like “World Trade Center” or about discussions of trade at meetings without reference to the content of the talks. Tweets were obtained from the Trump Twitter Archives (<http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/>) after searching for “trade.”

15. On the EU: “We are finishing our study of Tariffs on cars from the E.U. in that they have long taken advantage of the U.S. in the form of Trade Barriers and Tariffs” (June 26, 2018). Moreover, “Previous agreements now considered unfair: If the E.U. wants to further increase their already massive tariffs and barriers on U.S. companies doing business there we will simply apply a Tax on their Cars which freely pour into the U.S. They make it impossible for our cars (and more) to sell there. Big trade imbalance!” (March 3, 2018). On China: “When a car is sent to the United States from China there is a Tariff to be paid of 2 1/2%. When a car is sent to China from the United States there is a Tariff to be paid of 25%. Does that sound like free or fair trade. No it sounds like STUPID TRADE - going on for years!” (April 9, 2018). Similarly, “We are not in a trade war with China that war was lost many years ago by

the foolish or incompetent people who represented the U.S. Now we have a Trade Deficit of \$500 Billion a year with Intellectual Property Theft of another \$300 Billion. We cannot let this continue!” (April 4, 2018, 11:22). Mexico and Canada are also frequent targets, as Trump claims that they have treated US farmers “unfairly” for “15 years” (June 4, 2018). Trump argues that Japan, too, must renegotiate trade with the United States and adopt practices that are “based on the principle of fairness and reciprocity” (June 7, 2018). Regarding the G7, he tweeted, “Looking forward to straightening out unfair Trade Deals with the G-7 countries!” (June 8, 2018).

16. For instance, Trump stated, “India charges us tremendous tariffs” and “Brazil's another one. . . . They charge us whatever they want. . . . Brazil is among the toughest in the world—maybe the toughest in the world.” See *Reuters* (2018). Trump also alleged widespread “violations, cheating or economic aggression” all over Asia at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference, citing “years of broken promises.” In this speech he accused many countries of “not playing by the rules.” See Holmes and Phillips (2017).

17. Note also that even if Trump is trying to use this rhetoric to gain leverage over his trade partners, we argue that a by-product of this behavior is increased noncompliance, as states still come away with perceptions of widespread violations.

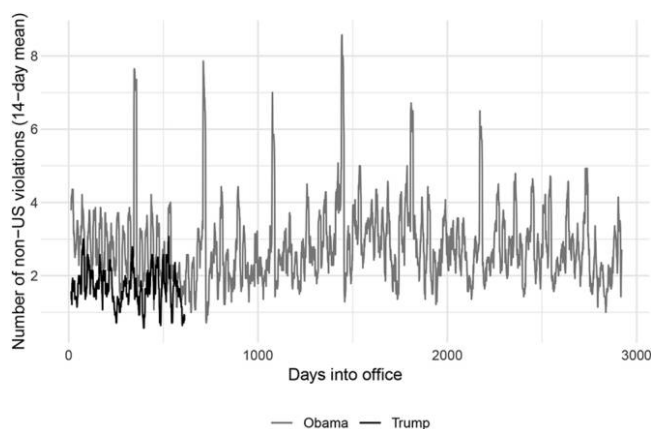


Figure 1. All types of violations

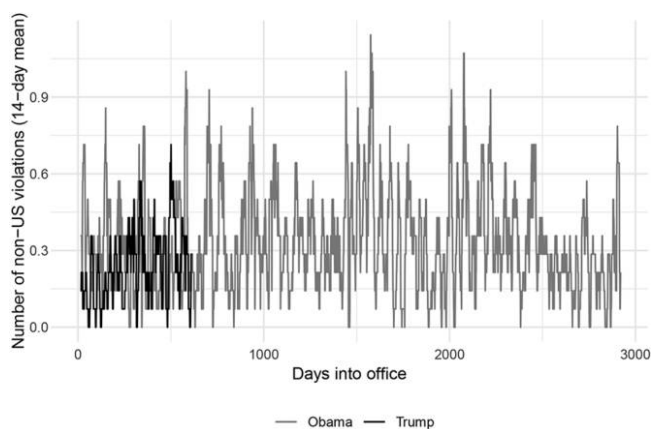


Figure 2. Import tariff violations only

cludes all types of violations, while figure 2 includes import tariffs only.¹⁸

Examining the trend lines, we can see that if anything, it appears that violations by the rest of the world have occurred at lower levels under the Trump administration, implying that the US accusations of cheating represent a change in rhetoric rather than underlying fundamentals.¹⁹ However, we can also examine the data more rigorously. First, we conduct basic two-sample *t*-tests for the number of daily and monthly violations under Obama versus Trump (see table 2). These show that significantly more violations occurred under Obama during this 614-day time frame—about 1 more violation per day on average. Similar results are obtained when limiting the data to import tariffs only.²⁰

Finally, we regress the number of daily and monthly violations on a dummy indicating whether Obama was in office (see table 3). We include fixed effects for the day or month of a given presidency (e.g., February 2009 and February 2017 are both coded as the second month of each presidency) and use robust standard errors. While these data remain observational, and thus we cannot infer causality from the results, the use of fixed effects helps us to control for many possible confounding variables.

These results largely echo the *t*-test results and are robust to the use of import tariff violations or the logged number of violations as the dependent variable, although we omit those results because of space constraints. Taken together, our

results suggest that Trump’s proclivity for highlighting trade discrimination comes despite a more favorable external environment in terms of actual violations. Thus, this rhetorical change likely represents a strategic choice to highlight and reframe long-standing trade behavior.

Impact on compliance pessimism

Our theory expects Trump’s penchant for highlighting norm and rule violations to spread compliance pessimism, thereby undermining the trade regime’s resilience. While it is too early to evaluate this claim systematically, and causality is difficult to infer in this setting since other actions by the Trump administration may result in similar outcomes, preliminary signs do suggest that such pessimism is growing.²¹ For example, reports state that Trump’s rhetoric has led to “a new attitude toward China [that] is rapidly taking shape across the U.S. political spectrum. . . . Seemingly everyone agrees that the Chinese are conducting trade in a predatory manner” (Werner 2018). Internationally, the *Straits Times* (2017) reported Trump’s accusations that “other countries are ‘playing dirty.’” Many analysts believe that perceptions of widespread cheating have taken hold, stating, for example, “My sense is that, in every country around the world, there is a somewhat widely held view that other countries are cheating on trade” (Lester 2017).

Preliminary evidence also exists that countries have responded with additional violations. For example, the *Times of India* reported, “With President Trump dominating the political discourse on trade, there is increasing pressure on the government from India to erect import barriers and support domestic manufacturing. . . . Thus, India has been

18. We exclude entries that mention “Import tariff changes in 20 . . .” since these double count previous entries. We get similar results if these are included.

19. The spikes that occur under the Obama administration seem to be mostly caused by Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Switzerland timing announcements of new financial supports for domestic firms around the new year.

20. For daily violations, the difference is .075, with a *p*-value of .05, and the difference for monthly violations is 2.190, with a *p*-value of .046.

21. For example, the United States itself is violating the WTO’s rules, which may increase perceptions of cheating in the trade system, is enacting new types of violations, and is threatening to leave the WTO.

Table 2. Welch Two-Sample t-Test of Violations under Obama and Trump

| | Difference | t | df | p | 99% Confidence Interval |
|--------------------|------------|-------|--------|------|-------------------------|
| Daily violations | 1.047 | 6.072 | 922.01 | .000 | .602, 1.492 |
| Monthly violations | 30.667 | 5.738 | 36.922 | .000 | 16.152, 45.182 |

raising import duties starting with items such as steel followed by automobile parts and components, footwear and toys [and] . . . more such hikes in import duties are likely to creep in.” The article cited India’s perceived need to start “fighting unfair trade competition” and specifically “tackling China’s unfair trade practices” (Singh 2018). Worries about cheating in the trade system similarly led prominent business leaders to argue that “in Africa if we don’t really put up tariffs we’ll end [up] being the dumping ground of the entire world” (Chutel 2018). Even if countries dismiss much of Trump’s rhetorical flourishes as exaggerated, there is suggestive evidence that his consistent use of the presidential spotlight for foreign trade violations is fostering compliance pessimism.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that the Trump administration publicly accuses other countries of trade violations at higher rates than past presidencies, and it theorizes that doing so will undermine the trade regime by fostering compliance pessimism. To test our argument, we adapt a theoretical model that shows how obfuscation can result in regime preservation to understand this new context. We demonstrate that while many past administrations have been skeptical of the trade regime, accusations of cheating and unfairness have been particularly acute under the Trump administration, and our theory expects potentially severe consequences for global cooperation.

While we show how our theory applies to the trade regime, it can be useful for understanding choices about publicity and noncompliance in a variety of other domains in international relations. For example, the Trump administration has interpreted Iran’s behavior as cheating in the nuclear regime,

even while authorities such as the International Atomic Energy Agency argue that it is not (Rizzo and Kelly 2018). Similarly, in explaining why the United States would not join the International Criminal Court and in trying to undermine the war crimes regime, John Bolton highlighted many behaviors that he classified as violations of the regime, arguing that such violations are widespread because “the hard men of history are not deterred by fantasies of international law” (Kahn 2018). Trump may also weaken NATO by claiming that its members are not complying with their payments to the organization (Jansen and Jackson 2018). Our theory and findings suggest that such rhetoric may reduce the resiliency of these institutions and norms in a similar fashion. Exploring how revisionist leaders’ rhetoric about noncompliance can foster compliance pessimism in these other empirical domains constitutes an interesting avenue for future work.

Future work could also investigate whether undermining the trade regime bleeds over into other areas. Perhaps generating compliance pessimism about international trade will lead to similar pessimism about international laws and norms in general. Whether the inferences that states draw from a trade violation are specific or general remains unclear. Do they believe that other states will violate trade norms in the future or that they will violate rules in many domains in the future? If the latter, which domains? It is possible that such behavior could therefore have implications outside the international trade regime and perhaps for global governance more broadly.

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Table 3. Violations under Obama

| Daily Violations | Monthly Violations |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1.047*** (.171) | 30.667*** (3.035) |

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.
 *** p < .01.

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