US Tariff Policy Since 1789

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July 10, 2026

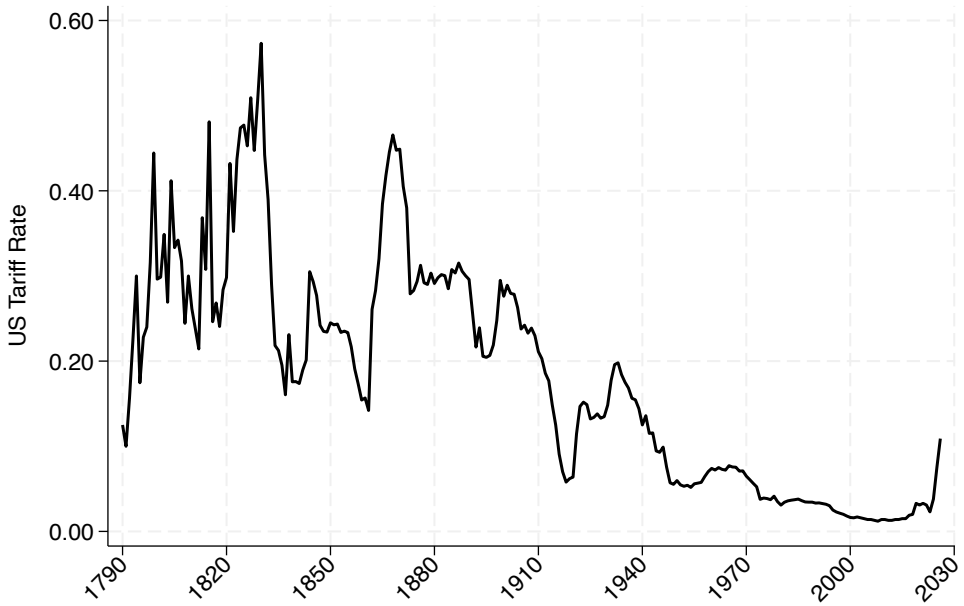
Abstract

We use a newly assembled, tariff-line-level dataset spanning the full history of US trade policy to revisit the evolution of tariffs since 1789. We document the institutional shift from Congressional setting to multilateral negotiation, the steady growth in granularity of the tariff code alongside expanding administrative capacity, and the under-appreciated role of specific tariffs, which feature prominently throughout US history and whose ad valorem equivalent moves mechanically with prices. We discuss the implications of this relationship for how we interpret past liberalization episodes and for empirical identification of tariff effects. Finally, we outline how the new data can advance research on the political economy of tariff-setting and on the macroeconomic and distributional consequences of trade policy.

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Despite the centrality of trade policy in the economic history of the United States, the data and historical perspective required to explore its effects in detail have, until now, been in too short supply. While a substantial literature has focused on rigorously quantifying the effects of tariff liberalization (Romalis, 2007; Caliendo and Parro, 2015; Hakobyan and McLaren, 2016; Pierce and Schott, 2016; Amiti et al., 2019; Fajgelbaum et al., 2020), researchers have largely focused on trade agreements in the 1990s and later—a period in which both the structure and magnitude of tariff changes differ substantially from those that characterize the majority of US history. This is true even of studies focused on the tariff increases of 2025, which yielded tariff rates that, while high by modern standards, remained substantially lower than those observed throughout most of US history, as displayed in Figure 1. On the other hand, authoritative work by Taussig (1910) and Irwin

Figure 1: US Tariff Ad Valorem Equivalent Tariff Rate, Since 1790



NOTE: Figure provides annual US import-weighted ad valorem equivalent tariff rate from 1790-2026. Various data sources including the Historical Statistics of the United States, USITC, and for data after 2016 the Trade War Tracker.

(2017), among others, provides sweeping perspective on the evolution and determinants of trade policy over time, but has had to do so without access to comprehensive micro-data. This article seeks to serve as a bridge between these two strands of literature. We rely on a newly assembled, highly disaggregated historical tariff dataset—the construction of which has been generously funded by the National Science Foundation—to introduce readers to several underappreciated aspects of the history of US trade policy. We use these data to shed light on how tariffs affect the American economy and how trade policy today contrasts with historical precedents.

We begin with a historical overview of the three "Rs" of historical tariff policy as proposed by Irwin (2017): the use of tariffs as a key revenue stream prior to the Civil War; the restrictive tariffs of the newly emergent industrial economy after the Civil War; and the period of "reciprocity" that

emerged beginning in the 1930s. After this overview, we use our data to provide insights into the mechanics of tariff policy over the long run. In particular, we emphasize that the state capacity to administer tariffs has evolved over time, which has enhanced US capacity both to strike new trade deals and to satisfy political-economy and distributional concerns associated with such laws. While tariff rates have broadly decreased over time and are now substantially lower than they were 150 years ago, we also show substantial variation across sectors. Tariff rates for food and crude materials have fallen fairly consistently since the Civil War. Meanwhile, apparel and machinery occasionally experienced substantial increases in their rates, especially in the 1890s and 1930s.

We then call attention to the use of specific tariffs and the implications of this well-known but underanalyzed feature of US trade policy. Specific tariffs—defined in terms of physical units of a product—while still in use today, were once the principal form in which tariffs were set. Unlike ad valorem tariffs, specific tariffs have distinct implications for revenue collected and for the impact of trade policy on American industry and consumers. Importantly, the ad valorem equivalent of a specific tariff depends on the price level, so the protective effect of US trade policy has often moved substantially and inversely with price levels. Using a simple decomposition, we show that, because specific tariffs were ubiquitous in US tariff laws, aggregate price changes mechanically moved aggregate tariff rates and are associated with a large share of cross-decade tariff variation. With this in mind, we discuss ongoing work rationalizing the use of and declining reliance on specific tariffs, and what their price-level sensitivity implies for Congress's attempts to protect particular industries and for researchers exploring the effects of tariff policy on micro- and macroeconomic outcomes.

In the penultimate section, we introduce our new dataset, representing the first comprehensive collection of US historical tariff lines, imports, and their reliance on specific and ad valorem tariffs.[1] This dataset constitutes the universe of US tariff policy since the country's inception. We show how new research based on these data and the insights discussed earlier can shed light on the impact of tariffs over the long run and can be used to address endogeneity problems that plague most attempts to assess the impact of trade policy. We illustrate the importance of having access to comprehensive and granular data for our understanding of how tariffs affected late nineteenth century industrialization, early twentieth century structural change, and the impact of trade policy on international competition and inequality in the mid-to-late twentieth century. These historical studies suggest that tariffs can have important implications for the American economy in some ways that have long been appreciated and in other ways that are more novel.

[1] While the analysis in the present article is based on snapshots of our database that have been aggregated over sectors and time, the ultimate disaggregate annual trade and tariff database will be released at the end of the grant period. Individual components may become available sooner as the primary studies from which the data were produced and their replication packages become available. https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/show-award/?AWD_ID=2314696&HistoricalAwards=false

The Shifting Institutions of Tariff Protection

Debates over tariffs and their distribution across industries date back to the earliest days of American history. As Irwin (2017) writes, "within just a few days of the opening of Congress, the great debate over trade policy was joined. That perennial debate revolves around the proper objective of import duties: to raise revenue, to restrict imports in order to protect domestic manufacturers, or to achieve reciprocity—or some combination of the three." Frankly, this debate among policymakers has evolved very little since the nation's founding. However, the institutions under which US trade policy is determined have evolved.

For the first 150 years of US history, US tariffs were determined by the US Congress. Their levels and distribution across industries were determined in response to changing economic needs and political preferences. Beginning in the 1930s, this pattern shifted, with US tariffs largely determined inside of a multilateral system in which the ideas of reciprocity and non-discrimination were central. In the post-World War II period, and eventually under the World Trade Organization, reciprocity involved reductions in tariffs and other concessions that led to an increase in imports comparable to the rise in exports achieved due to tariff reductions by trade partners.

During President Trump's first term, and more forcefully in his second term, he began a legally contested process of changing tariffs according to his own notions of reciprocity. This latest version of reciprocity is somewhat reminiscent in spirit to the idea championed in the late nineteenth century by President William McKinley, which allowed for the possibility of lower US tariffs provided that trade partners did not discriminate against US imports.

Tariffs for Revenue

Prior to the US Civil War, tariffs were the fundamental tool of the US government for raising revenue. To accomplish this goal, tariffs were imposed on products like alcohols, tea, coffee, and sugar—many of which were not produced in the United States but were imported. The need for revenue was especially acute when the US government needed to pay wartime debts, and so tariffs were generally higher for stretches after the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. The normal objective was for a peacetime balanced budget, which implied that tariff rates were likely to respond counter to the trajectory of the budget (Taussig, 1910). Over the course of the pre–Civil War era, tariffs accounted for approximately 90 percent of government revenue and 2 percent of GDP (United States Department of the Treasury, 1980; Johnston and Williamson, 2026).

The Rise of the Protective Tariff

In addition to raising revenue, nineteenth-century political debates on tariff policy centered around the extent to which tariffs should *also* be used to support domestic manufacturing production. Representatives from agrarian states—mostly concentrated in the South and later the Midwest—tended to support lower import duties. Because the United States was primarily an exporter of

agricultural goods, import duties raised prices of consumption goods for residents of those regions. Also, if other countries retaliated, US tariffs threatened the ability of farmers to access foreign markets for their goods. On the other hand, manufacturing regions—primarily the Mid-Atlantic and later the Northeast—felt the threat of foreign competition and wanted as much tariff protection as possible. Proponents of reducing duties argued that a system of protecting industries would surely lead to corruption, lining the pockets of those that were able to influence the government, while proponents of higher tariffs argued that foreign competition would be detrimental for import-competing industries (Irwin, 2017).

Because the authority to tax and tariff had been granted to the legislative branch in the US Constitution, debates on the appropriate level of tariffs across industries occurred in Congress, and the tariffs enacted were largely based on which party was in power. The ebb and flow of these interests and budgetary concerns are apparent in the general patterns in Figure 2, which displays ad valorem equivalent tariffs, indexed to 1865 levels, for a few broad industry categories. For example, between 1865 and 1890, when the Republican (protectionist) party was in control, tariffs on manufactured goods, machinery, apparel, and footwear remained elevated. On the other hand, tariffs on many of the traditional revenue products, like coffee, tea, tobacco, and sugar (contained in the Food/Beverages/Tobacco category), were reduced in an effort to reduce the government surplus generated by tariff revenue.

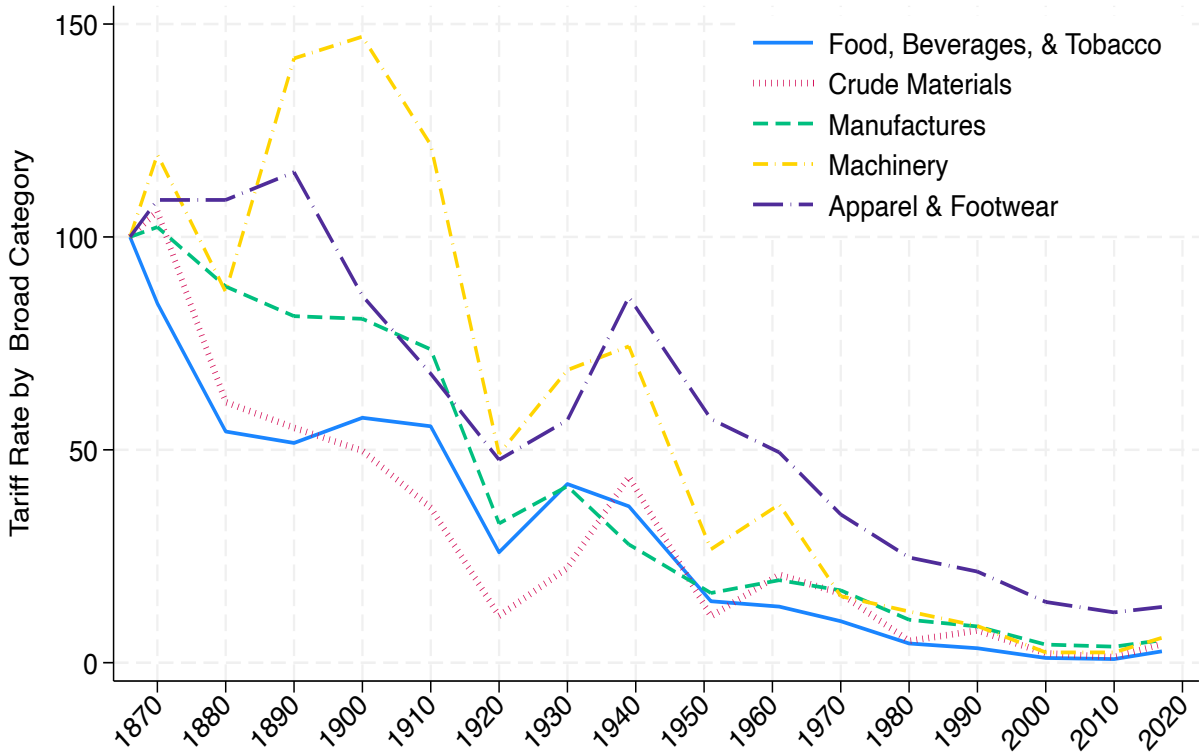
Republicans remained in control of Congress and the executive branch in most years of the late nineteenth century and therefore maintained their high-tariff regime until Woodrow Wilson took office in 1913, with the notable exception being the term of President Grover Cleveland from 1892 to 1896. In 1894, a significant reduction in tariffs occurred with the so-called Wilson-Gorman tariff. Later under President Wilson, the Underwood-Simmons tariff was passed in 1913, representing a Democrat-led broad-based reduction in tariffs. Under the new legislation, across-the-board reductions of around 25 percent were applied to manufactured goods, and many agricultural products, raw materials, and manufactured goods were moved to the duty-free list. This decline in legislated rates in 1913 generated a sharp decline in ad valorem equivalent rates, as can be seen in Figure 2.[2] The income tax, newly created in 1913, helped to offset the revenue losses to the federal government.

Bilateralism, Multilateralism, and Tariff Rate Heterogeneity

A fundamental change to how the US government set tariffs occurred with the passage of the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934. This institutional reform gave the executive the authority to negotiate with foreign nations to reduce tariffs in return for reciprocal reductions in tariffs in the United States. The passage of the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act was an acknowledgment by the Roosevelt Administration that if the United States wanted to be able to sell its goods abroad—considered crucial for economic recovery from the Great Depression—it must also be willing to buy

[2]However, we note that not all of the decline in this figure, or of aggregate ad valorem equivalent tariff rates in general, reflect legislated tariff changes—we return to this point shortly.

Figure 2: Tariff Rate for Broad Categories



NOTE. This figure shows the ad valorem equivalent tariff rate for broad industry groups. Food/Beverages/Tobacco is made up of Sections 0 (food and live animals) and 1 (beverages and tobacco) of the SITC revision 2. Crude materials contains SITC Sections 2 (crude materials, inedible), 3 (mineral fuels, lubricants, and related materials), 4 (animal and vegetable oils, fats, and waxes), and 5 (chemicals and related products). Manufactures represents SITC Section 6 (manufactured goods classified chiefly by material), Machinery Section 7 (machinery and transport equipment), and Apparel/Footwear Section 8 (miscellaneous manufactured articles).

goods from other countries (Roosevelt, 1934). As a result, the US tariff schedule was no longer solely a reflection of domestic interests and party politics, but instead began to reflect the interests of US trading partners as well. While the fragile state of the US economy coming out of the Great Depression prevented large broad-based reductions in tariffs during this period, Acosta and Cox (2025) show that bilateral negotiations generated increased variation in tariff rates within narrow categories of goods. The United States reduced tariffs, but restricted those reductions to the varieties in which its trading partners were interested. We will return to this increasing granularity of tariffs in the next section.

Bilateralism turned into multilateralism beginning in 1947 with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)—an agreement between nations to reduce trade barriers implemented through rounds of negotiations. A large body of work has studied these multilateral negotiations from a theoretical perspective (for example, Bagwell and Staiger (1999), Maggi (1999), Bagwell and

Staiger (2002), Ossa (2011), and Bagwell et al. (2020)). However, our disaggregated data provide a new window into how the nature of these negotiations determined the distribution of tariff rates between industries. Between 1947 and 1963, the GATT bargaining rounds shared a continued focus on reducing global tariff rates through line-by-line negotiations, much like the bilateral negotiations during the period immediately following the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934.

One important feature of this approach is that, because the tariffs were determined through reciprocal agreements, they became much harder to adjust. Starting with the Kennedy Round of the GATT, which began in 1964, countries agreed to make broad-based reductions of their entire tariff schedules (subject to exceptions), instead of engaging in line-by-line tariff negotiations. This change in format meant that preexisting cross-sectional variation in tariffs was largely preserved, even as average tariff levels came down. This pattern can also be seen in Figure 2: beginning in the 1960s, there is a general convergence of rates toward zero. Indeed, starting with the Tokyo Round of the GATT in 1973, reductions were made according to the "Swiss formula"—a nonlinear formula in which high tariff rates were cut more aggressively than low tariff rates. With these changes, variation in tariff levels across goods declined.

An awareness of the institutions that determine trade policy is important to understanding both the patterns and effects of protection. A high tariff rate may reflect tariffs imposed on products for revenue purposes, to appease lobbyists, for industrial policy motives, to protect inputs or final goods, or simple path dependence. The disaggregated tariff database that we have constructed can help distinguish these various channels, providing a new window through which we can more accurately understand the effects of trade policy.

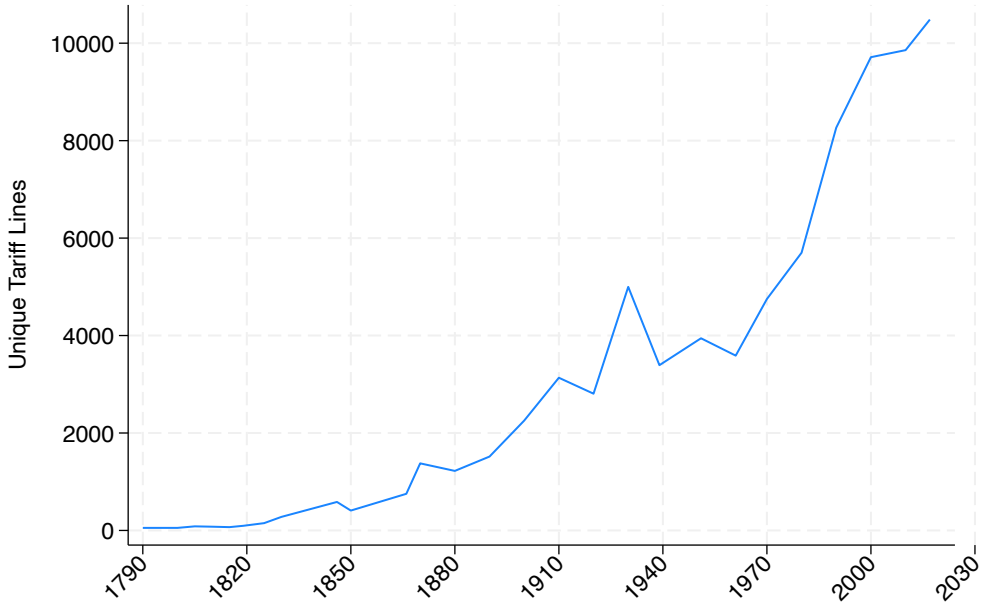
Increasing Granularity of Protection

Tariffs are imposed at what is commonly referred to as the "tariff-line" level. Each tariff line corresponds to either an individual product or a group of nondelineated but similar products. For example, at present there are two tariff lines associated with hewing tools: one for machetes (with no tariff) and one for other hewing tools (like axes, with a 4.5 percent tariff). Shifts in the average US tariff mask the exponential growth in the granularity of US tariffs over time. Figure 3 shows the number of distinct tariff lines in the United States between 1790 and today. As shown in the figure, the number of tariff lines has increased from fewer than 100 in 1790 to over 10,000 today. In the early years, this vast expansion reflected an increase in the administrative capacity of the US government. More recently, it reflects an effort by policymakers to increase the precision with which changes in tariff policy are applied.

1789-1850: Broad Tariffs, Inconsistent Reporting

In the very first session of the US Congress, the Tariff Act of July 4, 1789, imposed duties on imports in order to generate federal revenue (Irwin, 2017). Within the same month, Congress passed a comprehensive collection statute that constructed a port bureaucracy—collectors, naval officers,

Figure 3: Number of Tariff Lines, 1790-2017



NOTE. This figure shows the number of distinct tariff lines in years between 1790 and 2017. Between 1790 and 1850, the number corresponds to the number of distinctly reported imports in US import statistics. In the following years, only tariff lines on products with positive imports are included in the figure.

surveyors, and inspectors—and required manifests, entries, and sworn documents to establish the tax base. A decade later, Congress consolidated and expanded these procedures in the Collection Act of 1799, which became the backbone of customs administration (Goss, 1897; Madsen, Rotemberg, Traiberman, and Wang, 2025).

During these early years, legislated tariff bills were a far cry from the organized schedules of detailed product-level tariff rates that we have today. The use of industry codes to organize the tariff schedule was not considered before the US Civil War. Instead, tariff bills were written in plain text, without a one-to-one mapping to goods. For example, in some years all woolen manufactures received the same tariff, and in other years, rugs and clothing received different tariffs. Customs officials would occasionally compile the set of current tariffs and sell them to other officials or business (Jones, 1835, 1854), but contemporaneous accounts emphasize the "great labor" required to do so (Madsen et al., 2025). In these years, the information on tariffs collected and published represented a bare minimum. In tariff bills, goods were typically not named at all; instead, Treasury reported total imports by tariff rate category (for example, total value paying a 5 percent duty). Other information irrelevant to tariff assessment was generally not collected: quantities were not recorded for goods subject to ad valorem tariffs, values were not recorded for goods subject to specific duties, and goods on the no-tariff "free list" were often omitted entirely.

A major institutional change for data collection on tariffs occurred with the Act of February 10, 1820, as it was named, which directed the Treasury to produce annual statements showing

the "actual state of commerce and navigation" between the United States and foreign countries in forms prescribed by the Secretary of the Treasury (U.S. Congress, 1820). These statements were published as *Commerce and Navigation*. This change led to a partial improvement in the quality of data collection and good-level reporting in import statistics. Some quantities began to be reported for ad valorem goods, values were increasingly reported for specific-duty goods, and free-list items appeared more regularly. These changes are reflected in Figure 3, where in the period between 1820 and 1850 there is an almost quadrupling of the number of distinctly reported goods in import statistics. These improvements in reported trade data were not costless, requiring clerical labor, bookkeeping, and standardized routines at the ports (Jones, 1835). Indeed, the share of customs personnel titled clerk or bookkeeper was near-zero in 1816, but had reached 15 percent by early in the 1820s *Official Register of the United States* (Department of State, 1850). By 1850, clerks and bookkeepers accounted for roughly one-fifth of customs employment. Note that this increase in share was accompanied by increases in overall Customs employment, which rose from around 190 employees in 1817 to almost 2000 in 1850.

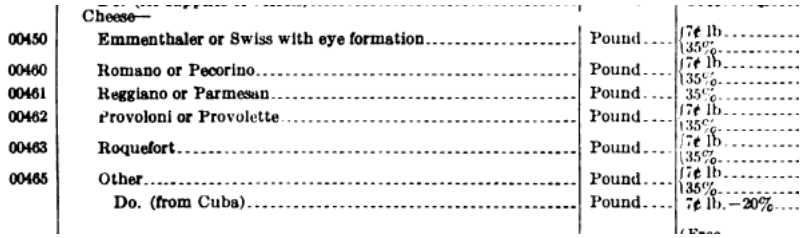
From 1850 to the Modern Era: More Tariff Lines, More Policy Precision

The number of tariff lines continued to steadily increase throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As shown in Figure 3, the number of tariff lines roughly quadrupled again between 1850 and 1930, before increasing another five-fold between 1930 and today. Grant (2023) proposes a model of endogenous classification that broadly fits the patterns we see in the data. In his model, policymakers choose the level of disaggregation at which to enforce policies like tariffs by trading off the costs of enforcing a more complex policy—including costs of gathering information—with the perceived political benefits of more targeted policy.

That policymakers saw a benefit in more targeted tariffs can be seen most clearly from the early 1930s to today. Early in this period, which coincided with the rise of US involvement in first bilateral and then multilateral trade negotiations, policymakers divided tariff lines into more detailed categories in order to more precisely target products relevant to the countries with which the United States was negotiating. For example, Figure 4 shows that in 1930, imports of cheese were broken into six categories, all of which faced a tariff rate of 7 cents per pound with a minimum of 35 percent. By 1937, having negotiated agreements with Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada, and France, the number of cheese-related tariff lines in the tariff schedule—shown in Figure 5—had doubled. In the agreement with Switzerland, a new tariff line for "Gruyere process-cheese" was created and the tariff rate was reduced to 7 cents per pound with a 20 percent minimum for that specific variety. In the agreement with Canada, new tariff lines for "Cheddar" were created and their tariff rates lowered from the original level, and similar for the agreements with France and the creation of a tariff line for "blue-mold" cheese and with the Netherlands and the creation of a line for "Edam and Gouda cheeses."

By creating additional lines, the United States was able to lower rates on some types of cheese while leaving the tariff on "other" types of cheese intact. In fact, in describing the agreement

Figure 4: 1930 Schedule A: Cheese

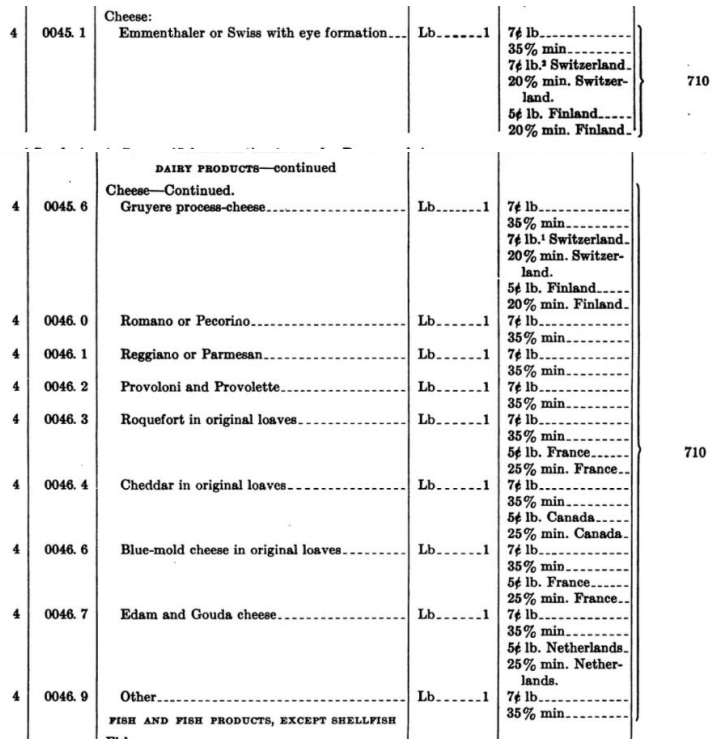


	Cheese—		
00450	Emmenthaler or Swiss with eye formation	Pound	7¢ lb. 35%
00460	Romano or Pecorino	Pound	7¢ lb. 35%
00461	Reggiano or Parmesan	Pound	35%
00462	Provoloni or Provolette	Pound	7¢ lb. 35%
00463	Roquefort	Pound	7¢ lb. 35%
00465	Other	Pound	7¢ lb. 35%
	Do. (from Cuba)	Pound	7¢ lb.—20%

NOTE. This figure shows the portion of the 1930 tariff schedule covering varieties of cheese.

negotiated with the United Kingdom in 1939, the US Tariff Commission stated in its Annual Report that "many new import classifications are established by the agreement either for the purpose of confining concessions to products supplied principally by the United Kingdom, or in order to limit duty reductions to the less competitive portions of the old classifications" (United States Tariff Commission, 1939). This type of behavior was systematic, especially during the period between 1930 and the mid-1960s (Acosta and Cox, 2025).

Figure 5: 1937 Schedule A: Cheese



4	0045. 1	Cheese: Emmenthaler or Swiss with eye formation	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min. 7¢ lb.[3] Switzerland. 20% min. Switzerland. 5¢ lb. Finland. 20% min. Finland.	710
		DAIRY PRODUCTS—continued			
		Cheese—Continued.			
4	0045. 6	Gruyere process-cheese	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min. 7¢ lb.[1] Switzerland. 20% min. Switzerland. 5¢ lb. Finland. 20% min. Finland.	
4	0046. 0	Romano or Pecorino	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min.	
4	0046. 1	Reggiano or Parmesan	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min.	
4	0046. 2	Provoloni and Provolette	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min.	
4	0046. 3	Roquefort in original loaves	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min. 5¢ lb. France. 25% min. France.	710
4	0046. 4	Cheddar in original loaves	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min. 5¢ lb. Canada. 25% min. Canada.	
4	0046. 6	Blue-mold cheese in original loaves	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min. 5¢ lb. France. 25% min. France.	
4	0046. 7	Edam and Gouda cheese	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min. 5¢ lb. Netherlands. 25% min. Netherlands.	
4	0046. 9	Other	Lb.	7¢ lb. 35% min.	
		FISH AND FISH PRODUCTS, EXCEPT SHELLFISH			

NOTE. This figure shows the portion of the 1937 tariff schedule covering varieties of cheese. While reduced rates are noted along with the country with which those reduced rates were negotiated, the MFN principle applied and so reductions were extended to all imports.

The second part of the above quotation alludes to new tariff lines that were created as a

way to improve the targeting of tariff policy across products, not just across countries. This behavior becomes particularly apparent as new products are invented or as recent inventions become mainstream. For example, prior to 1960, there was no separate tariff line for computers—they were instead included in a catch-all category covering "Other machines having as an essential feature an electrical element or device." In 1960, however, a new tariff line was created covering "Electronic computers and related electrical or electronic information processing machines, and parts thereof." New tariff lines continue to be created for new products or products that have become increasingly important. In the most recent revision of the Harmonized System (HS2022), an internationally standardized set of codes used for classifying traded products, the United States now has tariff lines for electronic waste, drones, and smartphones.[3] Tariffs began as a broad-based tax designed to raise revenue, but have since evolved into a system for tracking highly detailed products and enforcing policy in a targeted way across countries and products.

Complexity, Legislated Tariffs, and Enforced Tariffs

The interaction between the complexity of the tariff schedule and the administrative capacity of US customs determines the extent to which legislated tariff policy is actually enforced. From the first Congress through much of the early 1800s, despite having developed a fiscal system that depended on customs revenue, the US government could not reliably reconcile what was owed with what had been collected. In April 1816, Representative Benjamin Huger chaired a House of Representatives inquiry into "unsettled balances" due to the United States (Rao, 2016). Overlapping statutes, inconsistent Treasury circulars, and idiosyncratic port practices created what Huger described as a "labyrinth," with problems "especially among the collectors." Huger concluded that Congress could not exercise meaningful oversight without more standardized reporting. The Committee's proposed remedy was "annual and detailed reports" that would provide the Treasury with better practical information (Huger, 1816). Huger also emphasized that it was "impossible to anticipate all the difficulties" that would arise with the evolution of Customs over time.

The lack of reliable records directly reduced duties collected, particularly through the administration of "duty bonds," under which importers promised to pay duties after selling their wares. In 1807, Baltimore's collector reviewed customs bond records and found that previous collectors had not even maintained a list of overdue bonds. Conditions were worse at Mobile: by 1811, its collector admitted that not one duty bond had been collected in the District since its establishment (Rao, 2016). Weak recordkeeping also facilitated systematic undervaluation. In the 1820s, the dollar value of exported spices on which drawbacks—rebates on duties for imported goods that are then exported elsewhere—were claimed exceeded the dollar value of spice imports, despite the fact that spices were not produced domestically and were extensively consumed in the United States

[3]Prior to the Harmonized System (HS), classification was not standardized across countries. HS codes are classified and subclassified down to a six-digit level by the World Customs Organization (WCO)—so the introduction of new product codes for e-waste, drones, and smartphones was actually done at the six-digit level by the WCO. Countries can then add additional digits that are not standardized for legislation or information collection. The United States legislates tariffs at the eight-digit level, but collects import statistics up to ten digits.

(Goss, 1897). Such an outcome would have been impossible had export shipments been reliably linked to the corresponding import records that generated drawback eligibility.

The most dramatic failure of Customs accounting occurred in the defalcation of Samuel Swartwout, Collector of Customs for the port of New York. During his tenure, Swartwout systematically withheld funds that should have been remitted to the US Treasury, including tonnage duties, portions of fines and forfeitures, and collections on bonds. He reported large sums "on hand," justifying their retention as necessary to cover office expenses, pending drawbacks, protested duties, and unsettled accounts, while failing to provide a verifiable reconciliation. When his term ended in 1838 and he departed for Europe, Treasury investigations estimated the resulting shortfall at over $1.3 million in nominal 1838 dollars—at a time when federal receipts in the 1830s ranged from $25 to $35 million (Congressional Globe, 1838). Congress demanded to know why Treasury could not readily ascertain the defalcation "when it first commenced." In a January 1839 response, the Secretary of the Treasury offered two explanations (Treasury Department, 1839). First, the information flow that might have revealed the problem was not a statutory audit system: Weekly and monthly returns from collectors were described as voluntary instructions "not required by any law," maintained for administrative convenience rather than as a formal control mechanism. Second, even this voluntary paper trail was institutionally fragmented and operationally unwieldy. Treasury emphasized that the relevant New York returns were so numerous and dispersed across offices that reproducing them would have absorbed clerical capacity for months, crowding out current operations.

Nearly two centuries later, with entirely different policies and systems in place, the United States is again being confronted with the fact that tariff policy is only enforceable to the extent that the administrative apparatus is able to keep track of key information—what arrived, who imported it, how it is valued, what is owed, and what has been paid. It has been reported that the volume and complexity of changes to tariff rates imposed by the Trump administration starting in 2025 has made it difficult for the agencies responsible for screening imports and collecting duties to enforce those changes, making it easier for importers to evade the charges (Feng, 2025). In this symposium, Gopinath and Neiman suggest that this heterogeneous enforcement has contributed to a gap between legislated and actual rates, moderating the impact that the increase in tariffs has had on the economy. Whether, as proposed by Krueger (1974), this kind of selective enforcement can lead to additional economic costs as firms lobby politicians to protect or create rents, has to our knowledge, gone largely unexplored.

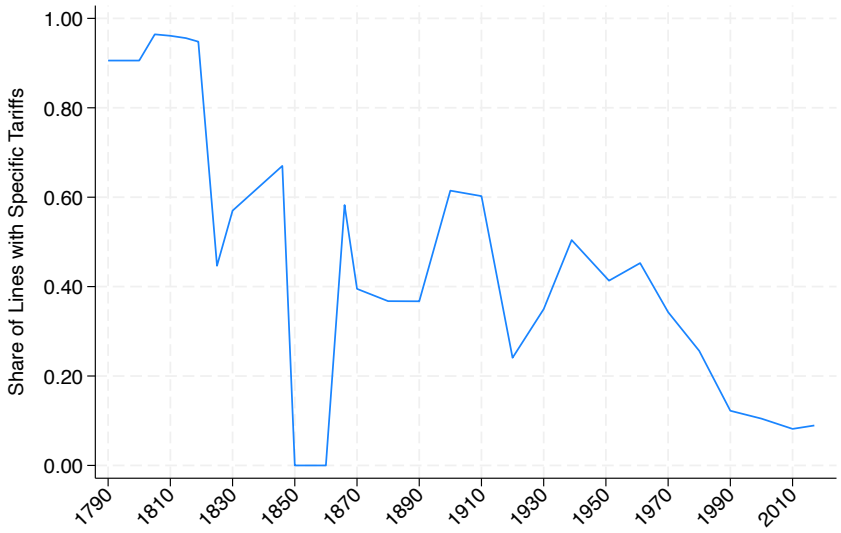
The Instruments of Protection: Specific and Ad Valorem Tariffs

Thus far, we have not drawn attention to what *type* of tariffs policymakers employed, and readers may presume that all tariffs are charged as a percent of the value of goods imported. This perception and treatment spill over into the academic literature and popular press as well. Indeed, the most common representation of tariffs—and all of our prior figures—reports the aggregate tariff rates

on a percent basis. Yet this convention is a matter of convenience, and it masks interesting and important shifts in policy. How much does the type of protection matter for the US economy and for how one should think about the primary determinants of protection and liberalization? We turn to this question now.

Tariffs come in two primary forms: specific tariffs are imposed as a price per unit—for example, dollars per pound—while ad valorem tariffs are imposed as a percentage of value. Compound tariffs are a combination of specific and ad valorem rates—say, 10 percent plus 5 cents per pound. In modern research on tariff policy, it is conventional to treat tariffs as ad valorem, but for much of US history, specific and compound tariffs were the dominant forms of protection (Irwin, 1998, 2017). Figure 6, which shows the percent of tariff lines featuring specific tariffs from 1790 to 2017, reveals that the share of tariff lines with specific rates was 90 percent in 1790. With the exception of the era spanning the Walker Tariff and Tariff of 1857—which employed an exclusively ad valorem schedule—specific tariffs remained a prominent form of protection well into the twentieth century, accounting for 45 percent of tariff lines and 60 percent of tariff revenue as late as 1960. Their use then steadily declined to the current share of approximately 10 percent of tariff lines by 2000.

Figure 6: Specific Tariff Share of Tariff Lines, 1790-2017

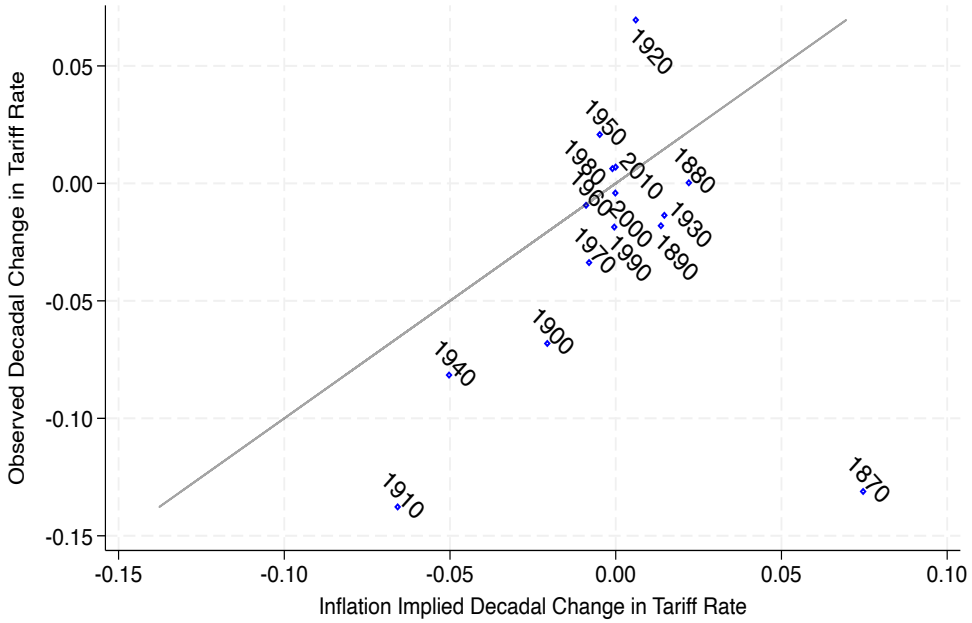


NOTE. This figure shows the share of distinct tariff lines that have either specific or compound tariff rates in years between 1790 and 2017. Between 1790 and 1850, the number corresponds to the number of distinctly reported imports covered by specific tariffs in U.S. import statistics. In the following years, only tariff lines on products with positive imports are included in the figure.

For purposes of comparison, the typical convention is to convert specific and compound tariffs into their ad valorem equivalent, dividing the per-unit dollar amount of the tariff by the price of the imported good. This procedure implies that, in the presence of specific tariffs, the ad valorem equivalent tariff level will depend not only on legislated tariffs but also, mechanically, on price levels. For a given dollar value of a specific tariff, higher prices erode the tariff protection and lower prices enhance it. Across goods and over time, the extent to which tariff protection is influenced

by such price fluctuations can be captured by the "specific tariff share," which is the proportion of tariff revenue accounted for by specific tariffs (Greenland and Lopresti, 2024). While the effect of changing prices on tariff protection has been documented at the micro-level by Crucini (1994) for a set of goods in the early 1900s and has been recognized as a driver of aggregate ad valorem equivalent tariff rates by Van Cott and Wipf (1983), Irwin (1998), and Greenland et al. (2025a), the extent to which this has been a primary driver of changes in tariff levels (apparent in Figure 1) — and, by extension, of US openness to trade and globalization — is less well appreciated.

Figure 7: Observed vs. Inflation-Implied Decadal Changes in the US Tariff Rate, 1870-2010



NOTE. This figure presents a scatterplot of observed decadal-equivalent tariff changes against those which would have manifest due solely to the inflationary erosion/enhancement of specific tariffs driven by changes in aggregate price levels. Aggregate price changes are calculated using historical US CPI. Specific tariff share and ad valorem equivalent tariff rates are taken from authors' calculations. We also plot a 45 degree line.

Following Greenland and Lopresti (2024), we characterize the importance of this channel by comparing decadal changes in observed US tariff rates to the changes predicted by subsequent aggregate price movements, given the current share of specific tariffs. This measure captures the magnitude of tariff changes that would have manifested in the absence of statutory rate changes. When prices rise, specific duties are eroded, yielding lower tariff rates; when prices fall, they are enhanced, yielding higher rates.[4] In Figure 7 we present a scatterplot of this relationship along with a 45-degree line. The pattern is striking. Only one decade falls far from the 45-degree line—1870–1880, during which decade-long deflation increased the protective capacity of specific tariffs while legislated tariffs fell in 1870 and 1872, including the movement of coffee and tea onto the duty-free

[4]Specifically, we regress decadal changes in aggregate AVE tariffs on $-\frac{\Delta \text{CPI}_t}{\text{CPI}_{t_1}} \times \text{STS}_{t_0} \times \text{AVE}_{t_0}$, where STS_{t_0} and AVE_{t_0} are the start-of-period aggregate specific tariff share and ad valorem equivalent tariff rate, respectively.

list (Klein and Meissner, 2024). Omitting this decade from our sample, a simple regression reveals that 66 percent of the variation in aggregate US tariffs over the last 140 years can be explained by aggregate inflation in the presence of specific tariffs alone. While the broad perception of tariff changes may be that they are primarily statutory, such shifts in fact appear to constitute a minority of variation over time.

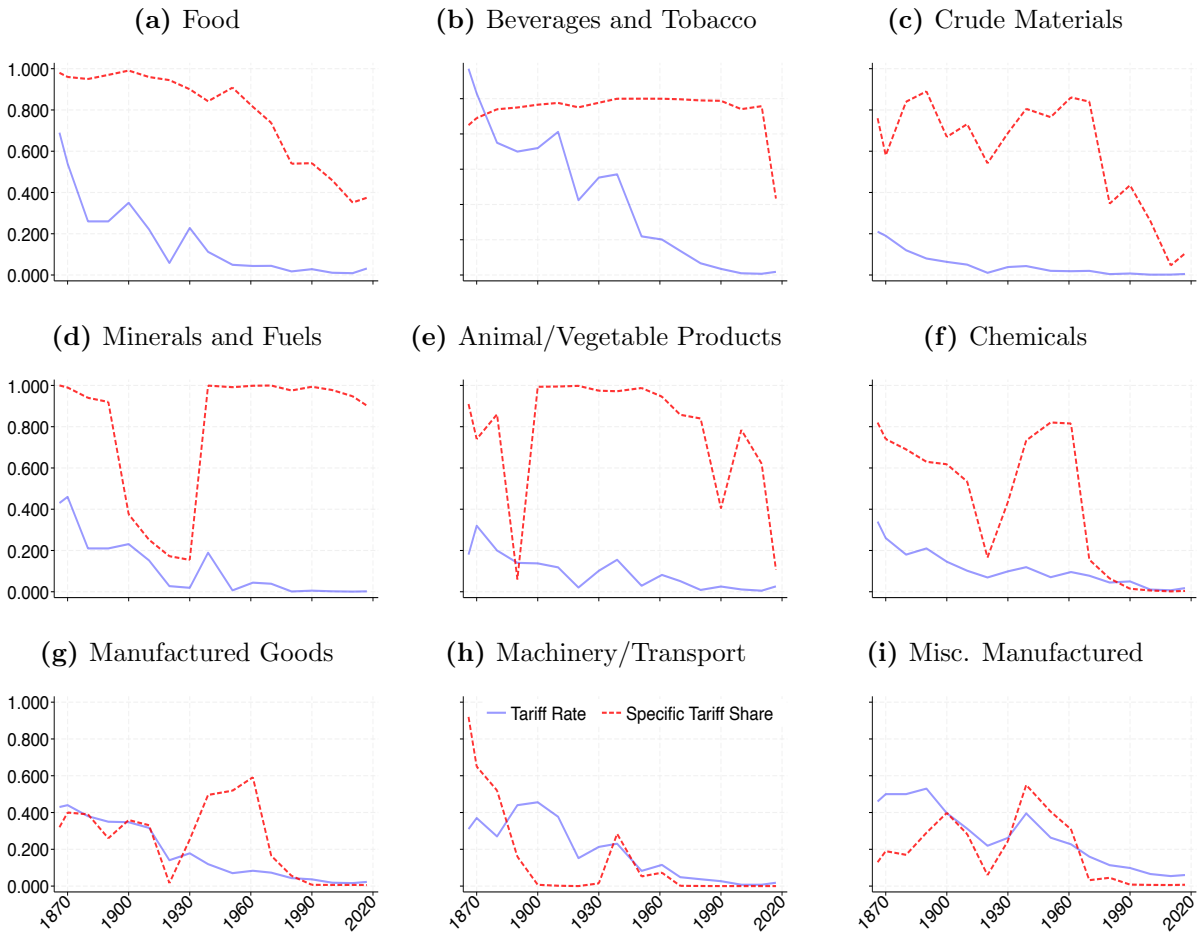
A complete accounting of the relative importance of statutory tariff changes over this period would require addressing not only the inflationary channel highlighted above, but also changes in expenditure shares and in the set of goods imported. While such an exercise is beyond the scope of this essay, Greenland, Lake, and Lopresti (2025a) provide an exact decomposition of aggregate tariff rates into these channels. In their sample, which spans the 1970s and 1980s, only 30 percent of the variation in aggregate tariff rates can be attributed to statutory rate changes; the remainder reflects the mechanical channel, changes in expenditure shares, and changes in the set of imported goods. They further show that treating all changes in tariffs as statutory can produce welfare estimates that are misleading not only in magnitude but also in direction. The mechanical relationship between price levels and tariff levels thus has important implications both for how we think about the determinants of liberalization and for how we quantify them. The statutory share is likely smaller still the further back one goes, when specific tariffs were more prominent. Serious attempts to evaluate the effects of tariffs on the US over its history must therefore grapple with the centrality of non-policy variation in tariff rates.[5]

Our tariff-line-level data allow us to compute the specific tariff share of revenue over time for each product between 1866 and 2017, in order to explore sectoral heterogeneity in tariff rates and types. In Figure 8, we plot for a selection of sectors both the sector-level specific tariff share and the ad valorem equivalent tariff. Three patterns emerge. First, consistent with the aggregate patterns shown above, ad valorem equivalent tariffs fell across all sectors over time, albeit at different rates. For some sectors, such as crude materials, protection began low and fell linearly. This stands in contrast to sectors such as Beverages and Tobacco, which had high initial levels of protection and whose cuts were subject to reversion. Second, although ad valorem equivalent tariff levels declined over time across the board, there was persistence in the reliance on specific versus ad valorem tariffs across sectors. That is, while sectors liberalized over time, they did not dramatically alter the mix of tariff types: raw materials, agricultural goods, food products, and tobacco products remained more reliant on specific tariffs than machinery and manufactured goods. Finally, the prevalence of specific tariffs declined notably toward the end of our sample. Thus, even as ad valorem equivalent tariffs declined, specific tariffs became less important as a share of that falling protection.

What explains sectoral persistence in reliance on specific tariffs, and why has the use of specific tariffs declined over time? At least three explanations have been suggested. First, as proposed in Madsen et al. (2025), the distinction may be an issue of state capacity to enforce the tariff code. Ad valorem tariffs can be subject to under-invoicing if trading parties lie about the value of

[5] In ongoing work, Acosta et al. (2026) explore the importance of accounting for these different sources of variation in tariff rates when quantifying the effects of tariffs on the macroeconomy.

Figure 8: Ad Valorem Equivalent Tariffs and Specific Tariff Shares by SITC Section



NOTE. This figure shows the ad valorem equivalent tariff rate and the specific tariff share of duties for a selection of SITC sections in each decade between 1866 and 2017.

imported goods. By contrast, specific tariffs distort the relative price of goods, creating additional inefficiencies if not sufficiently targeted. In their framework, while the state prefers a sufficiently targeted specific tariff schedule, which minimizes under-invoicing and distortions, its ability to implement such a schedule is contingent on its capacity. For example, in the presence of an ad valorem tariff, a diamond importer would prefer to minimize duties and convey a diamond as a cheap abrasive rather than an input in, say, expensive jewelry. If the government seeks to legislate distinct specific tariffs on different types of diamonds, it requires more direct state involvement in verification to ensure appropriate application of the tariff code. When the administrative state is small, the government's ability to implement a minimal-distortion specific tariff code is limited. As state capacity grows, it can provide a more differentiated schedule, with targeted rates for each type of good and accompanying enforcement.

A second mechanism to explain both the heterogeneous use of specific tariffs in the cross section and their decline is proposed by Greenland et al. (2026), who emphasize the volatility-dampening effects of specific tariffs. Because specific tariffs are levied as a fixed dollar amount per unit, they

anchor a portion of the tariff-inclusive price independent of world price fluctuations. As a result, specific tariffs generate a price floor for imports and deliver a lower variance of tariff-inclusive prices than ad valorem tariffs of similar magnitude. They argue that the choice of specific versus ad valorem tariffs may reflect a heterogeneous preference for price stability—for example, risk aversion—or heterogeneous need for this form of insurance over time.

A third explanation for cross-sectional heterogeneity relates to legislative inertia and persistence in the structure of the tariff code. Between the 1845 Walker Tariff and the Tariff of 1857, the US tariff code was entirely ad valorem. The Morrill Tariff of 1861 reintroduced specific tariffs. As shown by Greenland and Lopresti (2024), sectoral reliance on specific tariffs under the Morrill Tariff was highly predictive of sectoral reliance on specific tariffs through at least the Tariff Act of 1930. Indeed, the ongoing work of Acosta and Cox (2026) shows that, due to the shifting nature of trade negotiations in the twentieth century, many features of the tariff schedule from the 1930s have persisted until modern times, including sectoral reliance on specific tariffs.

In explaining the overall decline in the aggregate specific tariff share over time, at least two forces are at play. First, rising prices produce a mechanical erosion in the value of specific tariffs, leading to a decline in both the specific tariff share and the ad valorem equivalent for such tariffs. An inspection of price inflation over the past 60 years suggests this force plays a primary role. This view is also consistent with the interpretation of Irwin (1998), who documents substantial changes in ad valorem equivalent rates between policy changes that are correlated with aggregate price indices. Second, legislation in the late twentieth century converted many specific tariffs to ad valorem. US policymakers reduced their reliance on specific tariffs preceding GATT-mandated statutory tariff cuts—in particular, during the Tokyo and Uruguay Rounds of multilateral trade—as well as during the conversion from the earlier Tariff Schedules of the United States to the Harmonized System in the late 1980s (Greenland et al., 2025a). During such conversions, policymakers are forced to grapple with the fact that specific tariffs have different effects across trading partners with different export unit values. Thus, when targeting a particular tariff rate cut or establishing a new tariff schedule, policymakers must decide which country's rate to benchmark the new policy against. At least in these cases, a common pattern was to convert specific tariffs to an ad valorem basis prior to phasing them out.

Constructing a Unified Tariff Database

One of the primary aims in constructing the dataset that we describe and rely upon in this article is to provide a consistent series of US tariffs for researchers to employ. Assembling this series required digitizing a range of historical documents containing tariff and import data and developing a consistent classification system, allowing us to track the tariffs on individual products over time.

By far the greatest challenge in documenting the historical evolution of tariff protection is the need to develop a consistent product classification. In the earliest years of our data, from 1790 to 1850, creating a panel of product-level tariffs is not possible, as tariff bills were written in plain

Table 1: Data Sources

Year	Tariff Data	Import Data
1790-1819	Customs legislation	Annual Treasury Reports
1820-1850	Customs legislation	*Commerce and Navigation*
1850-1946	*Foreign Commerce and Navigation of the United States*	*Foreign Commerce and Navigation of the United States*
1947-1962	*Schedule A*	*US Imports of Merchandise for Consumption*
1963-1988	*Tariff Schedules of the United States*	*Census Annual Import Data Bank*
1980-1987	*History of the Tariff Schedules of the United States*	*Census Annual Import Data Bank*
1988-2026	US International Trade Commission	Census International Trade Data

NOTE. Customs legislation refers to tariff bills that were written into law, for example, the *Tariff Act of July 4, 1789*. Schedule A refers to "Schedule A Statistical Classification of Imports into the United States." The *History of the Tariff Schedules of the United States* contains MFN and column-2 rates of duty for the first year in the range, and staged MFN rates for the following years.

text, with lists of products that varied considerably from year to year. Similarly, import statistics in these years varied greatly in detail, with some years reporting products narrowly while others record broad aggregates by tariff rate. Madsen et al. (2025) describe these challenges in more detail.

With the introduction of the Walker Tariff of 1846, the United States began more systematic tracking of tariff revenue and products. Tariff bills in this era took a more consistent schedule-like structure, though goods at this point were grouped by tariff rate rather than product type. By the 1850s, tariff data become available by country and product and include information on quantity imported in addition to value and tariff rate. Data between this era and 1930 follow a nearly identical structure in editions of the *Foreign Commerce and Navigation of the United States*: goods are listed alphabetically within industries or broad product groups, with detailed descriptions, statutory tariffs, import quantity, value, and implied ad valorem equivalent tariff rate. In cases in which duties are levied on multiple dimensions of a good, two quantities and units may be reported for an individual product—for example, by the 1920s, tariffs on textiles reflected both weight and the thread-count of the good. Alphabetical lists of tariffs were provided under the *Schedule A* classification starting in 1903, while the 1920 edition of *Schedule A* was the first schedule with a hierarchical classification system similar to those used today. *Schedule A* was used until 1962, after which the United States transitioned to the *Tariff Schedules of the United States*, which was used until 1988, at which point the modern-day *Harmonized Tariff System* was adopted. Even within one such era, products are often "split," or "merged" over time, requiring detailed tracking of individual products across regimes.

It is difficult to track products across these different classification systems. Even within classification regimes, there were many changes in the codes used to classify products from one year to the next. For example, Acosta and Cox (2025) document that within the three classification regimes that existed in the 1930–1989 period, there were over 43,000 product code changes, over two-thirds of which had to be mapped manually by comparing tariff schedules from one year to the next. To provide a consistent classification system across the full dataset, we have manually mapped products in each year to the SITC (Standard International Trade Classification), Revision 2 classification. In more recent years, processes for this mapping already exist—for example, from

the Harmonized Tariff System to the SITC—but in earlier years we rely on the text descriptions in the tariff data to find the appropriate SITC code.

We chose the SITC (Revision 2) classification system due to several attractive features. First, it overlaps with the modern Harmonized System classification and is based on post-1925 classification systems, which were the first to provide numbered product groups. Second, a mapping between the SITC and the earlier Tariff Schedules of the US classifications have previously been developed in Feenstra (1996). Finally, the SITC defines products at a relatively disaggregated five-digit level, providing a better match than more recent systems to data preceding 1925.

We are typically able to map the historical tariff data between the three- and five-digit level in the SITC system. As one example, under the Tariff Act of 1930, 5,000 unique tariff lines can be mapped to 450 four-digit SITC industries. Such disaggregation allows for distinction at a product level. For example, the one-digit SITC code "0" corresponds to Food and Live Animals Chiefly for Food. The second digit differentiates among live animals (00) and meat and meat preparations (01). The third digit delineates means of processing distinguishing fresh, chilled, or frozen meats: (011) from salted, brined, dried, or smoked (012). The fourth digit distinguishes between prepared meats by type of animal, with 0121 covering swine (bacon, ham, and so on) for example. Naturally, the level of disaggregation varies across SITC categories, with an interquartile range of 13-69 tariff lines within four-digit SITC codes during this era. Textiles and their manufactures are by far the most differentiated products, with even narrowly defined SITC categories exhibiting different rates based on material, purpose, composition, whether hemmed or not, coloring and dyeing, and thread count. Such variation, while present in our data, maps to 48 four-digit level products within the SITC 65 code.

Importantly, data for the years after 1848 typically cover tariffs among traded goods only: products for which tariffs were sufficiently high to eliminate imports, or minor products with small import values, may not have been reported in the statistical summaries on which we rely. While the dataset thus may not fully reflect the restrictiveness of the tariff schedule, our focus on traded goods was intentional.[6] When tariffs are levied on a per-unit basis, calculation of a tariff rate requires conversion to an ad valorem equivalent rate. This requires the price of the good under consideration, which is only observed for traded goods. Given the prevalence of these tariffs throughout US history, we chose to focus exclusively on traded products throughout our sample.

New Data, New Directions

In this concluding section, we attempt to answer some primary questions on the role of tariffs throughout US history based on our ongoing research. In particular, we focus on recent studies of the effects of tariffs on productivity, structural changes, novel identification strategies, measurement issues, and important caveats for interpreting the distributional consequences of tariff policy over time.

[6]For the period 1866 to 1900, the share of total recorded imports in our data compared to the official statistics averages 98.4 percent, suggesting that the nontraded share is negligible.

Why Specific Tariffs Matter for Empiricists

As we emphasize above, the heterogeneous structure of the tariff code—in particular, the choice of ad valorem versus specific tariffs—is a key feature of our data. We begin by emphasizing why the ability to distinguish between specific and ad valorem rates can be crucial for empiricists attempting to measure the causal effects of trade policy. In general, tariff levels are endogenous to economic outcomes both statutorily and mechanically. Statutorily, politically manipulated tariffs may reflect the demand for protection (Grossman and Helpman, 1994). In empirical work, this endogeneity concern is typically addressed by exploiting plausibly exogenous changes in trade policy or with an instrumental variable strategy. The presence of specific tariffs implies that tariffs are also related to economic conditions due to the mechanical effect of prices on the ad valorem equivalent.

To the extent that the price movements that induce changes in tariff protection are unanticipated, however, they are not subject to the same political economy concerns associated with statutory tariff changes. In this way, as Greenland and Lopresti (2024) note, the stochastic protection offered by specific tariffs can be beneficial to researchers. Of course, the ad valorem equivalent of specific tariffs may still be endogenous to domestic outcomes if the underlying price changes are driven by domestic economic conditions.[7] To circumvent this concern, Greenland and Lopresti (2024) exploit price variation at a higher level of aggregation, such that price-induced tariff changes are not driven by observation-level demand or supply shocks. They demonstrate the usefulness of this identification strategy between 1900-1940 and find that variation driven by price movements in the presence of specific tariffs accounts for nearly 40 percent of the industry-level changes in ad valorem equivalent tariffs during these years. This variation is highly predictive of import growth and can be used to explore the effects of tariff protection on domestic labor-market outcomes in linked US Census data. The authors find that tariffs played an important role in shaping the US transition from an agricultural- to a manufacturing-based economy.

Following this identification strategy, Klein and Meissner (2024) explore the relationship between tariffs, labor productivity, employment, and gross output in the manufacturing sector between 1870 and 1910. Using disaggregated state-level and sector-level observations from the Census of Manufactures, they find that price-driven changes in tariff protection led to higher relative employment and output, but smaller average firm size and lower labor productivity. However, in some of the most concentrated industries of the time—such as tobacco products and meat packing—tariffs were associated with declines in output and employment. They interpret these findings as consistent with the idea that higher tariffs generally restricted domestic and foreign competition, lowered innovation, and raised output prices for US consumers. Given the prevalence of specific tariffs documented above, this variation is likely to prove useful to researchers in various settings. As

[7] This concern is not unique to this identification strategy. For instance, the well-known paper by Autor et al. (2013), on the subject of how rising imports from China affected local US labor markets, also requires variation not driven by domestic outcomes. However, it should be broadly noted that evidence on the effects of changes in trade policy is often framed through the lens of "import competition" in reduced form studies, and while such studies are informative, they are subject to the well-known missing intercept problem. Evidence of tariff cuts yielding worse *relative* economic outcomes can be misinterpreted as a statement about level effects by the public.

specific tariffs are not unique to US trade policy, this strategy is also promising in other countries and eras.

At the same time, specific tariffs may threaten identification if researchers use ad valorem equivalent tariff rates without understanding the extent to which measured tariff changes are driven by price variation rather than statutory rate changes. Greenland et al. (2025a) explore this issue in the years surrounding the Tokyo Round of the GATT and show that naive handling of tariff data can lead to biased and even incorrectly *signed* estimates. Reductions in ad valorem equivalent tariffs correspond to increasing imports if they are driven by reduced statutory rates. However, if falling ad valorem equivalent tariffs are driven by the inflationary erosion of specific tariffs, lower measured tariffs may be associated with falling imports. That is, because there is a mechanical inverse relationship between price levels and tariff levels, changes in ad valorem equivalent rates may be endogenous to outcomes of interest precisely because they reflect the same price movements. Interpreting the relationship between changes in ad valorem equivalent tariffs and economic outcomes of interest requires understanding whether the changes are driven by statutory or inflationary channels. Our comprehensive database has all of the data necessary to isolate these confounding effects.

The Economic Effects and Political Economy of Tariffs

Changes in US tariffs over time have not typically been uniform across sectors, but have often reflected the special interests of the policymakers. This remained true even as GATT-mandated liberalizations became the dominant form of liberalization throughout the second half of the twentieth century. These liberalizations often targeted *average* reductions in tariffs, but allowed countries opportunities to offer greater than mandated cuts in some sectors while sparing others from significant liberalization. Granular historical data on tariffs can be used to assess the performance of favored industries and the political attitudes toward trade in more exposed locations. While Acosta and Cox (2025) have emphasized how these features altered the regressivity of the US tariff code, here we suggest a few cases in which data on the level and structure of tariffs over time could enable innovative research on classic questions regarding the political economy of tariff setting.

First, the current wave of antiglobalization sentiment, coinciding with the rise of China as an economic superpower, has raised questions about the roles played by surging imports and US distributional considerations in predicting support for protectionism. Insights might be gained from an historical accounting of the direct effects of previous import surges on the US economy. There has been some recent work on import responses to country-specific liberalizations using disaggregated data, but the effects on other domestic outcomes of prior rounds of liberalization have gone largely unstudied. Recent work addressing this gap in the literature includes Alessandria et al. (2025) who revisit a major liberalization vis-à-vis China in 1980, while Greenland et al. (2025b) explore the effects of the Tokyo Round of the GATT on inequality.

Attitudes toward tariffs could also be shaped by the extent to which macroeconomic conditions such as the degree of exchange rate flexibility facilitate adjustment to trade shocks. Both the

1971 "Nixon shock" (Irwin, 2013) and 1985 Plaza Accord to adjust exchange rates put a sharp focus on the interaction between exchange rate policy and tariff policy. In both cases, the threat of rising trade barriers was used to offset what policymakers viewed as a problem induced by an overvalued US dollar, which differentially harmed US manufacturing output and exports. Tariff changes across history, including the eras in which the US dollar did not serve as a global reserve currency, may offer unique opportunities to evaluate tariff-exchange-rate interactions. These data offer opportunities to explore how exchange rates and other macroeconomic policy tools work in complement with or substitute for tariff policy.

Earlier tariff episodes may also cast light on tariffs as a form of industrial policy—that is, whether temporary and focused increases in tariffs served to bolster particular US industries. In theory, such tariffs could be unwound once the industries are strong enough to face global competition. There is very little evidence, however, on how quickly such reindustrialization might or does take place. While tariff cuts do seem to be associated with relative declines in manufacturing (Pierce and Schott, 2016), it need not be the case that tariff hikes induce firm entry—especially in the face of uncertainty over the extent of commitment to high tariff levels in the future. A related concern is that the use of tariffs for industrial policy or other purposes may create demand for future protection. While the canonical view of tariffs often frames policy as an equilibrium outcome (Grossman and Helpman, 1994), it seems reasonable to believe that if tariffs lead to a reorganization of supply chains to support domestic manufacturing, for example, then suppliers will have a vested interest in maintaining tariffs as part of a new status quo.

While we have focused largely on our own work on these topics, we hope that other researchers will take advantage of the data described in this article when they are made available in order to better inform scholars, policymakers, and the lay public of the role that tariffs have played in the development of the US economy and their effects on US workers, consumers, prices, and firms. We hope, too, that such information may inform our views of what optimal policy looks like moving forward. Whether the post-2025 moment proves to be a genuinely new regime or a reversion to older ideas, the answer will turn on the same political and economic fundamentals that have shaped US tariff policy since 1789—fundamentals that the data described here are well-positioned to bring into view.

Acosta, Cox, Greenland, Lopresti, and Meissner benefited from support under NSF Award #2314696. Greenland and Lopresti also thank the Upjohn institute for support via the ECRA program. Meissner gratefully acknowledges support from the UC Davis Levine Funds. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of coauthors: Alexander Klein, James Lake, Erik Madsen, and Shizhuo Wang. We are grateful for guidance from the editorial board. We would like to thank seminar participants at the NSF conference on US Tariff Policy hosted at NC State University.

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