

Blue Sky

**The Tariffs Are Not Economic Policy,
They Are a Tool to Take Over Our Democracy**

By Senator Chris Murphy

April 3, 2025

Those trying to understand the tariffs as economic policy are dangerously naive. No, tariffs are a tool to collapse our democracy. A means to compel loyalty from every business that will need to petition Trump for relief.

This week you will read many confused economists and political pundits who won't understand how the tariffs make economic sense. That's because they don't. They aren't designed as economic policy. The tariffs are simply a new, super dangerous political tool.

You see, our founders created a President with limited and checked powers. They specifically put the power of spending and taxation in the hands of the legislature. Why? Because they watched how Kings and despots used spending and taxes to control their subjects.

British kings used taxation to reward loyalty and punish dissent. Our own revolution was spurred by the King's use of heavy taxation of the colonies to punish our push for self-governance. The King's message was simple: stop protesting and I'll stop taxing.

Trump knows that he can weaken (and maybe destroy) democracy by using spending and taxation in the same way. He is using access to government funds to bully universities, law firms and state and local governments into loyalty pledges.

Healthy democracies rely on an independent legal profession to maintain the rule of law, independent universities to guard objective truth and provide forums for dissent to authority and independent state/local government to counterbalance a powerful federal government.

But the private sector also plays a role to protect democracy. Independent industry has power. The tariffs are Trump's tool to erode that independence. Now, one by one, every industry or company will need to pledge loyalty to Trump in order to get tariff relief.

What could Trump demand as part of a quiet loyalty pledge? Public shows of support from executives for his economic policy. Contributions to his political efforts. Promises to police employees' support for his political opposition.

The tariffs are DESIGNED to create economic hardship. Why? So that Trump has a

straight face rationale for releasing them, business by business or industry by industry. As he adjusts or grants relief, it's a win-win: the economy improves and dissent disappears.

And once Trump has the lawyers, colleges and industry under his thumb, it becomes very hard for the opposition to have any viable space to maneuver. Trump didn't invent this strategy. It's the playbook for democratically elected leaders who want to stay in power forever.

The tariffs aren't economic policy. They are political weapons. But as long as we see this clearly, we can stop him. Public mobilization is working. Today, a few Republicans joined Democrats to vote against one set of tariffs.

The people still have the power.

Christopher Murphy has been a U.S. senator from Connecticut since 2013.