

Tariffs vs. the working class

Editoriale

For decades, politicians have sold tariffs as a tonic for the working class. In reality, one particular group seems to benefit more than any other from trade wars: Washington influence peddlers.

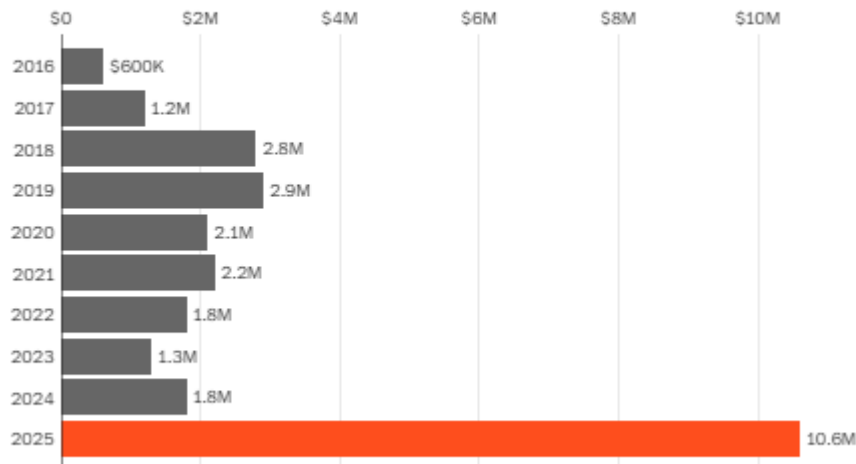
The United States collected some \$288.5 billion in tariff revenue last year, up from \$98.3 billion in 2024, thanks to a barrage of new levies imposed by the Trump administration. These tariffs, designed by elite lawyers in D.C. and implemented with highly technical and specialized language, presented a unique opportunity for lobbyists to charge large corporations exorbitant rates to seek relief and other carveouts. And they did very well for themselves.

The 20 largest lobbying firms [reported \\$824 million](#) in revenue last year, up from \$595 million during the final year of the Biden administration.

In the fourth quarter of 2025, lobbying contracts that mentioned tariffs were worth \$10.6 million, up from \$1.8 million a year earlier, [according to the](#) Advancing American Freedom Foundation.

Tariff lobbyists have never had it better

Total value of lobbying contracts related to tariffs in the fourth quarter of each year, 2016-2025



Source: Advancing American Freedom

No wonder the plaintiffs in [the Supreme Court case](#) challenging President Donald Trump's tariffs [are small businesses](#), not large ones. Big companies can afford to hire attorneys to understand the complex rules and lobbyists to try to minimize the pain. Small businesses get stuck with [enormous tax bills](#).

While lobbyists cashed in, Americans felt the pain. Poorer people [tend to spend](#) more of their income on goods that are subject to tariffs than higher earners. Tariffs redistribute corporate profits from less politically connected industries to more politically connected industries, not from the rich to the poor.

Sometimes the tariffs are sold as a national security imperative, but that hasn't been the case over the past year. [Taxing imports from Canada](#) is not a way to reduce drug overdoses. Imposing tariffs on countries that [already eliminated their trade barriers](#) doesn't help to eliminate trade barriers.

Defenders of import taxes sometimes argue that lobbying is unfortunate but worthwhile given all the jobs that are saved or protected. Yet the government [bailed out farmers](#) because they were harmed by tariffs. And the number of total manufacturing jobs has [fallen by 72,000](#) since last April. Car [sales are down](#), and there are [19,000 fewer](#) car manufacturing jobs in the country.

All this is why 6 in 10 Americans oppose Trump's tariffs, according to [the latest polling](#), and approval for them has consistently lagged other parts of his agenda, [even among](#)

[Republican voters](#). The people's elected representatives in Congress wouldn't pass new tariffs, which is why the president is imposing them by executive order and claiming a nonexistent emergency.

Draining the swamp is hard, but tariffs are an unforced error that make an already difficult task impossible.