

Donald Trump and William McKinley: What can the past tell us about the political risks of tariffs?

Dr Nathan Cardon talks through the tariffs implemented by President William McKinley and what cautionary lessons Donald Trump could learn.

4 April 2025



“President Donald Trump has stated a fondness for William McKinley, 25th president of the US from 1897-1901. One reason for this is McKinley’s role in spearheading the Tariff Act of 1890, known as the McKinley Tariff, while serving as a congressman.

“The United States first imposed a system of tariffs on imported goods in 1789 to protect the manufacturers of the new nation. In 1861, Republicans enacted the Morrill Tariff, which doubled the tax rate on hundreds of imported goods to raise money for the Union Army during the Civil War and protect northern business. The most consequential tariff of the nineteenth century, however, was McKinley’s in 1890. It raised the tax on imported goods to between 38 and 49.5 percent. In an era of monopolies and oligopolies, this meant that big businesses —assured they wouldn’t face competition from Europe—raised the price of domestic goods to new heights. The McKinley Tariff, far from making America great, contributed to a downturn in the U.S. economy and helped destabilise the political landscape of the 1890s.

“Americans, faced with rising prices, punished the Republican party in that November’s elections. Democrats retook the House, and McKinley lost his seat. In the Senate, the Republican majority was reduced to just four senators, while a new political movement of farmers and workers—the People’s Party or Populists—emerged as a powerful third voice in American politics. Although the Democrats partially reduced the McKinley Tariff, with the economy already weakened, the collapse of a railroad company in 1893 triggered a financial crisis that led to the worst economic depression in the nation’s history until the Great Depression of the 1930s.

“When McKinley was elected President in 1897 unemployment was still near 20 percent. Upon entering the White House, McKinley signed into law the Dingley Tariff, undoing the small cuts made by the Democrats. However, at the start of McKinley’s second term his enthusiasm for tariffs was wavering. The day before his death, he gave his backing to reciprocal trade treaties. His successor, Theodore Roosevelt, continued McKinley’s support for expansionist American power abroad and high tariffs.

“As we have seen this week in Wisconsin and looking ahead to the 2026 midterms, congressional Republicans might do well to remember the political punishment their party faced at the polling station after the full impact of the McKinley Tariff was felt by the American public.”