

Critics suspect Trump's weird tariff math came from chatbots

Rumors claim Trump consulted chatbots

On social media, rumors swirled that the Trump administration got these supposedly fake numbers from chatbots. On Bluesky, tech entrepreneur Amy Hoy joined others posting screenshots from ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and Grok, each showing that the chatbots arrived at similar calculations as the Trump administration.

Some of the chatbots also warned against the oversimplified math in outputs. ChatGPT acknowledged that the easy method “ignores the intricate dynamics of international trade.” Gemini cautioned that it could only offer a “highly simplified conceptual approach” that ignored the “vast real-world complexities and consequences” of implementing such a trade strategy. And Claude specifically warned that “trade deficits alone don’t necessarily indicate unfair trade practices, and tariffs can have complex economic consequences, including increased prices and potential retaliation.” And even Grok warns that “imposing tariffs isn’t exactly ‘easy’” when prompted, calling it “a blunt tool: quick to swing, but the ripple effects (higher prices, pissed-off allies) can complicate things fast,” an Ars test showed, using a similar prompt as social media users generally asking, “how do you impose tariffs easily?”

The Verge plugged in phrasing explicitly used by the Trump administration—prompting chatbots to provide “an easy way for the US to calculate tariffs that should be imposed on other countries to balance bilateral trade deficits between the US and each of its trading partners, with the goal of driving bilateral trade deficits to zero”—and got the “same fundamental suggestion” as social media users reported.

Whether the Trump administration actually consulted chatbots while devising its global trade policy will likely remain a rumor. It’s possible that the chatbots’ training data simply aligned with the administration’s approach.

But with even chatbots warning that the strategy may not benefit the US, the pressure appears to be on Trump to prove that the reciprocal tariffs will lead to “better-paying American jobs making beautiful American-made cars, appliances, and other goods” and “address the injustices of global trade, re-shore manufacturing, and drive economic growth for the American people.” As his approval rating hits new lows, Trump continues to insist that “reciprocal tariffs are a big part of why Americans voted for President Trump.”

“Everyone knew he’d push for them once he got back in office; it’s exactly what he promised, and it’s a key reason he won the election,” the White House fact sheet said.

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