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## **GOP should support free trade**

By Bill Watson

The U.S. trade agenda is floundering and there's a lot of blame to go around. House Democrats have refused to support trade promotion authority (TPA), which would streamline passage of President Obama's signature trade initiative, the Trans-Pacific Partnership. As for the Senate, Harry Reid recently announced his opposition, and the administration doesn't seem willing to apply the political muscle needed to get it through.

The news media have also reported that "the tea party" is rising up in opposition to TPA. They point to a handful of organizations that, using the party label, have argued that free trade agreements are part of the president's globalist agenda to enact "Obamatrade."

The truth is that the tea party movement has consistently driven the Republican Party toward genuine, unconditional support of free trade. The evidence is there for anyone willing to look.

We have two terms worth of voting records to help us understand the impact of the tea party on trade politics in Washington. The "tea party class" of House and Senate freshmen from 2010 voted strongly in favor of the last three trade agreements, along with the rest of the Republican caucus. More importantly, members most closely aligned with the tea party movement have been much more likely than other Republicans to support opening the U.S. market without the need for reciprocal trade agreements.

These members stood out last term for their principled opposition to popular bipartisan trade initiatives. Members like Tim Huelskamp, Justin Amash, Jeff Flake and Mike Lee broke with their Republican colleagues when Congress voted to expand subsidies from the Export-Import Bank, to impose tariffs on all goods from China under the pretext of currency rebalancing, and to exacerbate protectionist antidumping laws. They were joined by conservative groups like FreedomWorks and the Club for Growth that condemned these programs as harmful corporate welfare and economic interventionism.

That's not to say that there aren't Republicans that actively oppose trade. Late last year some 27 Republicans signed a pair of letters opposing trade promotion authority. The leaders of the effort, such as Rep. Walter Jones, have opposed trade expansion for decades. However, some of the signatories, such as Reps. Michele Bachmann, Paul Broun, Louie Gohmert, and Steve Stockman, are members of the Congressional Tea Party Caucus.

These members appear to have accepted the argument that trade promotion authority gives undue power to President Obama. Protectionists at the American Jobs Alliance have relied on the power of an anti-Obama message in their campaign to paint free trade agreements as part of a power-grab by the president to impose his anti-American “Obamatrade” agenda.

This attempt to turn free trade into a referendum on Obama is frustrating and nonsensical. Republicans have been begging the president to request trade promotion authority for years over staunch opposition from House and Senate Democrats. Right now, President Obama’s own disinterest is the strongest impediment to his trade agenda.

Adding to the confusion, some news sources have also cited the anti-trade views of conservative activists like Judson Phillips of the for-profit “Tea Party Nation,” and Phyllis Schlafly of the paleoconservative Eagle Forum as evidence of the tea party movement’s impact on trade policy. But the position and rhetoric of these groups doesn’t match up with the ideological character of the broader tea party movement. Rather, they seem to embody a lingering strain of economic nationalism that fueled grassroots conservative movements in previous decades.

The tea party movement is quintessentially different. The energy motivating conservative grassroots today is fueled by a free market populism that has no room for a top-down economic agenda.

While some of its members may be sympathetic to the idea that every widget and customer service call should be “Made in America,” the tea party movement has demonstrated itself to be more focused on shrinking the size and scope of the federal government. Tariffs are taxes, subsidies are spending, and using regulation to help industry is the heart of cronyism.

The argument for supporting trade promotion authority, then, is quite simple. Free trade means removing harmful policies. Trade agreements are an effective way to make that happen, and trade promotion authority is meant to facilitate those agreements.

Republicans courting the tea party vote would do well to look at the evidence and fight for free trade, rather than obstruct it. They should fight against protectionists in both parties who would weigh down TPA with special-interest deals or wasteful entitlement programs, and insist that trade agreements not include mandates on nontrade issues, such as environmental protection and labor rules.

Doing so would further the cause of free trade while taking a stand against Democrats in Congress and the White House. Surely that’s a strategy that Republican insiders, genuine tea party activists, and the broader conservative base can all get behind.

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