



Ryan's Dismal Trade Record

'Unity' Speaker embraces deals many conservatives abhor

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October 14, 2015

Whether it is nation-to-nation accords or broad agreements involving large blocs of countries, Rep. Paul Ryan has fought time and time again for trade deals that are anathema to many conservatives.

Ryan may be on the cusp of becoming a candidate for Speaker who, according to some pundits, can “bridge the divide” between conservatives and moderates in the GOP caucus.

But, as grass-roots conservatives increasingly have soured on pacts they regard as harmful to American workers, Ryan has stuck to his guns on trade.

The Wisconsin Republican played a key role in corralling Republican support for a measure granting President Obama authority in June to negotiate a deal with 11 Pacific Rim nations. It is a rare issue on which the president could not count on support from his own Democratic Party.

“Paul Ryan has never met a so-called free-trade deal that he didn’t like,” said Kevin Kearns, president of the United States Business and Industry Council. “He was happy to give the Obama administration fast-track authority. He was with them on concerns over strong language on currency manipulation ... right down the line.”

Congress, with Ryan’s support, defeated a proposal to make currency manipulation part of any trade deal in the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Trade critics contend that some countries distort a free market in international trade by artificially devaluing their currencies against the dollar, which makes American exports more expensive and imports cheaper.

Should Ryan assume the Speaker’s gavel, Kearns said, “I think it’s a disaster for the country.”

On the TPP, Ryan did not just vote “yea.” By all accounts, he played one of the biggest roles in the House in rounding up support from wavering members. Politico in May quoted Kevin Madden, who represents the Business Roundtable’s Trade Benefits America Coalition, as saying that Ryan was “unrelenting in engaging members.”

Ryan consistently has earned high marks from organizations that support free-trade deals. Since taking office in 1999, he has voted 83 percent of the time in support of free trade, according to a tally by the libertarian-oriented Cato Institute.

Here is a sampling of his most prominent “yes” trade votes:

- The United States-Chile Free Trade Agreement Act in 2003.
- The U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement in 2003.
- The U.S.-Australia Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act in 2004.
- The Central America Free Trade Agreement in 2005.
- The free-trade deal with Peru in 2007.

He also voted against a bill in 2000 that would have withdrawn the United States from the World Trade Organization, which regulates international commerce and settles disputes related to trade rules violations.

Ryan’s roots on free trade and its domestic cousin, immigration, run deep. Before winning election to the House, he was a young staffer at Empower America, a think tank founded by former Republican Congressman Jack Kemp. The organization strongly promoted open trade and immigration reform.

Ryan also has a long history of statements promoting trade deals.

“I think this would be a punctuation mark on the declining narrative of America and we should not have our fingerprints, as Republicans, on anything that makes it look like we’re in decline,” he told Politico in May, responding to conservative opposition to TPP. “Trade is very important; it’s about time that this administration gets around to it. Forget our party, this is important for our country.”

Ryan actually promotes the type the of sovereignty-infringing worldwide rule making to which conservative particularly object.

After passage of trade promotion authority, he told “Face the Nation” on CBS in June: “Now that we have TPA, America can be at the front of the line writing the rules of the global economy, which is in our interests, and I think that’s what we got out of this.”

To Kearns, such arguments are “nonsense.” He said Ryan’s record reflects a knee-jerk impulse to support anything labeled “free trade,” regardless of the details.

“He’s an ideological free-trader,” he said. “If you look at the history of trade promotion authority, the fast-track trade bill, he played a central role in the House.”

Kearns said Ryan carries water for the Fortune 500 executives who want access to cheap labor. Such deals in the past have destroyed American industries, killed U.S. jobs and widened the U.S. trade deficit — all while having no impact on overall economic growth, he said.

“And Paul Ryan doesn’t care,” he said. “He doesn’t get it.”