



## Obama woos Dems on fast-track

By Jordan Fabian

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The White House is aggressively courting House Democrats on fast-track trade legislation ahead of a contentious summer vote.

The effort is expected to be similar to a White House push in the Senate that included personal calls from President Obama, last-minute talks off the Senate floor, briefings by Cabinet officials and perks from the Oval Office.

“The president is personally extremely committed to getting this done and to making his case on the merits of new trade agreements directly to members of Congress and to the American people,” said one White House official, who predicted Obama would make his case to lawmakers “both publicly and privately.”

But even with the president’s wooing, fast-track just cleared procedural hurdles in the Senate. It faces more daunting prospects in the House — something the administration has acknowledged.

It would settle for a “slim, bipartisan majority,” White House press secretary Josh Earnest said last week.

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) on Monday said he hoped to schedule a vote: “It’s my intent to get that done this month.”

The end of July might be the deadline for Obama’s top legislative priority. When lawmakers return to Washington after the August recess, the presidential election will have heated up, and it could be impossible politically to navigate the trade debate.

As few as 14 House Democrats are backing Obama’s call for fast-track, which would make it easier for the White House to conclude negotiations on the sweeping Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal by preventing Congress from amending it.

Obama could need as many as two dozen Democratic votes given opposition from many Republicans, who are generally supportive of free trade but have reservations about giving the president more power.

Democrats face enormous pressure to oppose Obama from labor unions and other liberal groups that have vowed to punish Democrats who back fast-track.

The White House is targeting two groups of lawmakers — centrist New Democrats and the Congressional Black Caucus — to pick up votes. The president has met with members of both coalitions this year to address their concerns about trade.

Obama has dispatched Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, Labor Secretary Tom Perez and U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman to make his case; House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) — though she has not signed on to the fast-track bill — has helped organize meetings.

“We’ve been drilling down on currency manipulation, dispute resolution, food sanitation, environmental concerns, workers’ rights, the list goes on and on substantively,” Pelosi told reporters last month.

In the past, Obama has shown little desire to use the perks of the White House to lobby members of Congress to back his legislative goals. But trade is different: Reps. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) and Ron Kind (D-Wis.), who back fast-track and the TPP, scored invitations to a state dinner in April with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The White House says its pitch to Democratic lawmakers behind closed doors does not differ from the case it makes publicly and frames the trade deal as a way to boost the U.S.’s economic influence in Asia while bolstering worker protections.

“When we talk about the opportunity that exists for creating jobs and expanding economic opportunity for middle-class families by opening up more overseas markets to U.S. goods and services — that’s a message that resonates with Democrats,” Earnest said last week.

Supporters of trade and Democratic strategists say it’s critical for the president to intensify his push as lawmakers return to Washington from Memorial Day recess.

“He definitely needs to get up to Capitol Hill and do what presidents do when they want something — when they really want something,” Scott Lincicome, an international trade attorney and adjunct scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, said of Obama. “We’re going to need more Democrats, and that’s going to require far more effort from the White House in the next couple of weeks.”

Observers who have criticized Obama’s handling of Congress in the past say there are signs his efforts are paying off.

“They developed a very effective playbook that should serve them well in the House,” said Jim Manley, a former adviser to Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.).

Democrats say that, given the historically tough politics surrounding trade, there is no avoiding a close vote.

“Their goal is just to get it over the goal line. They’re not going to get a big sweeping victory,” Manley said. “Get the best list you can and work the hell out of it.”