



Posted on Wed, Dec. 8, 2010

## Are tea partyers anti-trade?

**The next Congress' approach to the issue is difficult to predict, but protectionism will probably be an exception among new members.**

By Daniel Griswold

On spending, debt, and health care, the tea party message on Election Day was loud and clear. But where dozens of newly elected tea party candidates stand on trade policy is a big question hanging over the next Congress.

While tea party members embrace free markets, limited government, and reduced federal meddling, some tea party leaders have openly questioned the benefits of free-trade agreements such as NAFTA and a recently reached deal between the United States and South Korea.

The majority of the movement's rank and file seems to share that skepticism. Recent polls by the Pew Research Center and NBC News found that more than 60 percent of tea party members hold a negative view of free trade and trade agreements - a higher share than is found among Republicans or the population as a whole.

If tea party members apply their stated principles consistently, they should embrace every opportunity to promote free trade. The \$26 billion the U.S. government collects each year from tariffs amounts to the most regressive tax it imposes. Remaining U.S. trade barriers drive up the cost of living for low- and middle-income American families, who spend a larger share of their income on goods subject to the highest tariffs, such as food and low-end clothing. Repealing those tariffs would be a tax cut for the poor.

Free trade also promotes U.S. goals abroad without expending tax dollars. Trade with less-developed countries can pull people out of poverty far more effectively than foreign aid, and trade agreements can deepen our ties to allies such as South Korea and Colombia.

In contrast, protectionism is just another form of subsidy for politically connected producers. The same government that bailed out General Motors and Chrysler protects other special interests with tariffs and production subsidies. Will tea party members who are angry about corporate bailouts really want to carry water for the United Steelworkers union, textile

magnates, and the sugar industry by supporting anti-competitive trade barriers?

Where many of the newly elected Republicans stand on trade is unclear. Free trade was not a plank in the tea party platform, and most tea party candidates for the House had not had to think much about trade issues before, never mind actually vote on a trade bill.

Still, worries that the tea party movement will pull the Republican Party in a protectionist direction are probably overblown. Despite the antiestablishment undercurrent that propelled the GOP wave in the midterm elections, the incoming tea party members will most likely support incumbent Republican leaders when the House organizes in January. Those leaders are far more supportive of trade than the Democratic leaders they ousted.

Presumptive House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) has a long record of support for trade agreements. The same goes for incoming Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia, Ways and Means Committee chairman Dave Camp of Michigan, and trade subcommittee chairman Kevin Brady of Texas. Under their direction, the House will likely be a friendlier place for trade agreements than it was under the outgoing Democratic leaders, who reflected their union supporters' hostility to free trade.

Informal surveys show that few tea party candidates for Congress ran against free trade. In fact, some high-profile tea party candidates embraced it as central to their message. In Illinois, for example, Bobby Schilling defeated Democratic incumbent Phil Hare with a campaign that emphasized, along with standard tea party themes, the benefits of free trade, especially for major regional employers such as Caterpillar and John Deere.

One quirky exception may be Rand Paul, the Republican senator-elect from Kentucky. Like his father, Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, he embraces free trade in the abstract but questions the constitutionality of trade agreements and U.S. membership in the World Trade Organization. As a result, his voting record on actual trade bills may resemble that of a more trade-skeptical Democrat.

An early test for the tea party caucus could be the modified U.S.-South Korea trade agreement reached last weekend, which the Obama administration hopes to submit to Congress early in the new year. A later test will be renewal of the protectionist, subsidy-laden farm bill. How tea party members vote on those trade-related measures will reveal the extent of their commitment to their stated core principles of free markets and limited government.

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