



Congress gets closer to fast-tracking Obama's trade deal

By Timothy B. Lee

April 16, 2015

1. A bipartisan group of legislators introduced a bill on Thursday to expedite approval of the controversial Trans-Pacific Partnership.
2. The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR), Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT), and Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI), would make it easier for the TPP to get an up-or-down vote in Congress without amendments.
3. Opponents of the TPP, including Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), have rallied to stop the legislation.

President Obama says he needs trade promotion authority to negotiate the TPP

Obama's predecessors, including George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, have enjoyed Trade Promotion Authority, also known as "fast track," which allowed them to negotiate a number of trade deals. But the authority expired in 2007, and Obama has struggled to get it renewed by Congress.

The White House says that fast track is needed to get trade deals done because other countries will be reluctant to bargain knowing that Congress might try to modify a deal after it has been negotiated.

Of course, many fast track opponents don't want the negotiations to succeed. They've argued that the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal, currently being hammered out by countries such as the United States, Japan, Chile, and Vietnam, would benefit big companies at the expense of ordinary workers.

Getting Senator Ron Wyden's support is a big deal

Fast track enjoys fairly broad support among Republicans, but is opposed by many Democrats. Wyden, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, is widely respected by Democrats, and Republican leaders have said they won't be able to get a deal passed without Wyden's support.

The key concession that earned Wyden's support is a new provision allowing Congress to withdraw the president's fast track authority if trade negotiations are not proceeding to Congress's satisfaction.

"I can't figure out what this accomplishes," says Simon Lester, a trade analyst at the Cato Institute, of this new provision. He points out that Congress has ultimate authority over whether to approve or reject trade deals anyway, so a Congress dissatisfied with a trade deal negotiated by the president can simply vote it down.

And the compromise hasn't won over some fast track critics. Rep. Sandy Levin (D-MI), for example, has blasted the deal as "a major step back."