

Trade can bridge the partisan divide

By former U.S. Rep. Tom Davis (R-Va.) and former U.S. Rep. Amory F. Houghton (R-N.Y.) - 10/19/11 11:00 AM ET

We hear a lot about the deeply divided electorate, about the gap between the priorities of red state and blue state America. While partisan differences have sharpened over the years, the truth is that the American people – conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican – are unified when it comes to what our leaders in Washington should be focused on. A September CBS/New York Times poll found that 59 percent of respondents said that the most important problem facing the country today was the economy. To put that number in perspective, the next highest answer given was “Budget Deficit/National Debt” that clocked in at just 8 percent.

It is clear that the electorate wants Washington to find a way to turn this economy around, and to the average voter there is no more important barometer to the economic health of the nation than the unemployment rate. With the unemployment rate over 9 percent, it is clear that what has been tried in Washington simply is not working.

The corollary to the deeply divided America is the deeply divided Capitol Hill. Certainly it is true that a number of factors, from campaign finance reform to redistricting to the rise of interest groups, have polarized Washington, yet there are still issues that can and should transcend the partisan divide.

We recognize that there are limits on what Washington can do, there is no magic wand that can be waved and millions of Americans will suddenly find work. The limits of what Washington can do are even further narrowed by the dangerous debt and deficit situation we face today. No matter what some believe, we cannot simply spend our way out of this recession. The truth is, we simply cannot afford to.

There are things that can be done, however, like creating an environment where American businesses are given the best opportunity to succeed in the global marketplace. Expanding our international trade opportunities not only is something that Washington can do, but it is also one of those rare issues that has the ability to bridge the much talked about partisan divide on Capitol Hill.

After much delay, large bipartisan majorities in both chambers approved the Colombia, South Korea and Panama free trade agreements.

Ratifying the free trade agreements with Colombia, South Korea and Panama was a good start – but there is much more that can and should be done to expand our global trade opportunities.

There are good reasons for this bipartisan support. The benefits of the three agreements are tremendous: \$13 billion more in exports and 100,000 new jobs.

Our experience with free trade has repeatedly shown that these agreements work. According to the Cato Institute:

“In the past decade, FTAs with 14 other nations have been signed, approved, and enacted, providing evidence to evaluate the effects of such agreements on bilateral trade flows. An analysis of trade flows with each of these 14 countries reveals that, on the whole, these agreements have delivered on their central promise to promote more trade between the United States and its agreement partners. Both U.S. exports and imports with this group of countries have expanded more rapidly than overall U.S. trade since each agreement was enacted. This has delivered a double benefit to the U.S. economy, as exports have expanded markets for U.S. producers, while imports have delivered lower prices and more variety for American consumers and more affordable inputs for U.S. producers.”

Currently, there are 209 free-trade agreements around the world, but the United States is party to only 11. Other nations are leaving us behind while we stand still. It's critical to our economic growth that we continue to negotiate additional free-trade agreements with trade partners.

Part of this effort to expand trade should include restoring the President's fast-track authority. Fast-track trade authority, which expired in 2007, allows the President the flexibility necessary to negotiate and implement new trade agreements.

There are many opportunities across the globe for expanded trade for American companies. New free-trade agreements must be a priority of this President and this Congress. We can begin with the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The U.S. is currently negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership with eight other nations: Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. There have been nine rounds of negotiations already between the parties. In November, President Obama will be hosting the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' meeting. A framework for this trade agreement should be in place by this important gathering.

It's rare these days that an issue comes up in Washington that can address a concern of an overwhelming majority of the American people, enjoys widespread bipartisan support and can be implemented within the limits of our current debt and spending crisis. Trade is that issue. The President and this Congress should act quickly to build on the success of the recently passed free trade agreements to continue to expand opportunities for American companies worldwide and in turn create jobs for people right here at home.