



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 7, 2015

McConnell Might Save Obama's Trade Deal — and Lose Senate in 2016

If President Obama is to succeed in advancing the so-called free trade agenda, he will have to overcome some stiff opposition from his fellow Democrats.

While Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) is preparing to bring Trade Promotion Authority to a vote in the Senate next week, Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) wants to put off consideration of the matter while the Senate deals with legislation on highway funding and renewal of government surveillance authority under the PATRIOT Act.



Meanwhile, a number of Democrats seeking to replace GOP incumbents in the U.S. Senate next year are already exploiting the trade issue in states where Republicans are considered vulnerable. "At the risk of having some of you literally faint, I want to compliment the president for the way he's handling the trade issue," McConnell told reporters at a Tuesday afternoon press conference. Working closely with the White House on trade legislation has "been almost an out-of-body experience," the majority leader said. "We're working to get together to try to get it across the finish line."

President Obama summoned a group of Senate Democrats to the White House Wednesday in an effort to shore up support for the trade bill, [Politico reported](#). Those in attendance included Democrats who are undecided about giving the president "fast-track" authority to finalize negotiations on a deal that Congress would be able to vote for or against, but without the opportunity to add any amendments.

The administration is seeking the fast-track authorization for its proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement on trade with Pacific Rim nations. Republicans have supported legislation to remove trade barriers with other nations for at least the past two decades, going back to President Clinton's North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), passed with overwhelming Republican support in the lame-duck session of 1994. Congressional Democrats, with the support of organized labor, have generally opposed the trade agreements, arguing they have resulted in closed plants and lost jobs here at home, as the lowering of tariffs and other trade barriers have encouraged manufacturers to shift jobs overseas while continuing to enjoy the advantages of selling in the vast U.S. market. The significantly lower wages in Third World countries, they contend, along with the lack of environmental and health regulations that U.S. firms must deal with, give an unfair cost and price advantage to goods manufactured overseas.

Reid has said he won't be able to block the legislation indefinitely, since seven Democrats are already on record in support of Republican efforts to put the agreement on fast track. That, together with solid Republican support, is expected to be enough to pass the authorization. But proponents fear that even the procedural delays that Reid could throw up will give labor groups and Democrats against the bill more time to mobilize opposition.



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Opponents might find fresh ammunition in the U.S. Census Bureau [report](#) this week, showing another huge spike in the nation's balance-of-trade deficit. The deficit for March was \$51.4 billion, an increase of 43.1 percent over the February deficit of \$35.9 billion. The trade deficit with Korea has more than doubled in the first three full years since the adoption of the free trade agreement with that Asian nation. U.S. imports from Korea have increased by \$11.3 billion a year since the agreement was adopted, while American exports to that country have actually declined by six percent, or \$2.7 billion.

The numbers are significant, since advocates have long argued that free trade agreements bolster American businesses and create more jobs for American workers by increasing the markets for U.S. exports. Opponents claim pet economic theories in Washington, D.C. are being slain by the facts of economic decline in the rest of the country.

Former Ohio Governor Ted Strickland, a Democrat, plans to make trade policy one of the "major defining issues" in his Senate race against incumbent Republican Rob Portman. "The people of Ohio are sick and tired of trade deals which result in jobs and the economy being injured," he [told The Hill](#). "That's why this is going to be a major issue between Sen. Portman and myself." Portman, who served as a top trade official in the George W. Bush administration, fired back, saying it is Strickland's opposition to trade deals that would injure the state's economy.

"What he's talking about is killing jobs in Ohio," Portman said. "If you're not for exports, you're not for jobs. Our state is a big exporting state." Portman accused the Democrat of "taking a radical position by saying we shouldn't be expanding markets for our farmers and our workers."

Strickland is not alone, however, in believing opposition to trade deals will be a winner for Democrats, especially in Midwestern and "rust belt" states such as Ohio, where hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs have been lost.

In Wisconsin, where former Democratic Senator Russ Feingold is polling ahead of GOP Senator Ron Johnson, a progressive group led by Feingold has labeled the Trans-Pacific Partnership "ruinous for our middle class."

In Missouri, Democrat Jason Kander, who is already running against GOP Senator Roy Blunt, has put out a four-minute [YouTube video](#) about the TPP, calling it "a bad deal for Missouri."

"The Obama administration is negotiating this deal in secret and asking Congress to fast-track it before the final details are really known," Kander says on the video. "So I don't think Congress should just rubber-stamp a trade agenda when so much is at stake." Kander, Missouri's 34-year-old secretary of state, warned that the trade deal could threaten the progress enjoyed by the auto industry in the state, where 20,000 automotive or auto-related jobs have been added in the past five years. He cited a statistic published by the American Automotive Policy Council, something that might prove awkward for Blunt, whose son, former Governor Matt Blount, is president and top lobbyist for the group.

"The American Automotive Policy Council says that between the years 2000 and 2012, 180,000 vehicles were exported by our country to Japan, while Japan sent to us 16.3 million," Kander said. "Why would we do anything that could make that ratio worse?"

In Pennsylvania, Republican Senator Pat Toomey, former head of the pro-free trade Club for Growth, voted for fast-track authority in the Finance Committee. Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski, one of two Democrats looking to run against him, said he would fight against TPP to save Pennsylvania jobs. Pawlowski's likely primary opponent, former Representative Joe Sestak, has not yet weighed in on TPP, *The Hill* reports, while noting that Sestak opposed trade deals when he was in the House.



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In Florida, Representative Patrick Murphy, a Democrat, hopes to succeed Senator Marco Rubio, who is campaigning for the GOP presidential nomination. Murphy has declared his opposition to “any trade deal that fails Florida jobs, labor standards or the environment.”

In Maryland, where Democratic Senator Barbara Mikulski will retire at the end of next year, two Democrats looking to succeed her — Representatives Chris Van Hollen and Donna Edwards — are both opposed to fast-track, but Edwards has said she’ll use Van Hollen’s past support of trade deals against him.

Republicans don’t deny there is a good deal of popular sentiment running against the type of trade deals presidents have been negotiating and Congress has been ratifying over the past two decades. But they claim they are performing the rare political feat of doing what is right, instead of what’s popular. “Trust me, I realize free trade is not a popular thing,” Senator Johnson, a former plastics manufacturer, said at a recent town hall event in New London, Wisconsin. “It’s always easy to show the plant that shut down and when another plant has opened up in China,” he said. “What’s a more difficult case to make is the benefit we all have by being able to purchase cheaper products.”

“World feed needs are going to double in the next 55 years, and the Mississippi River Valley is the biggest contiguous piece of agricultural ground in the world, Missouri’s Senator Blunt told *The Hill*. “The Mississippi River is the trade artery of that great piece of agricultural ground. Whether it’s production or processing, these are great opportunities, and now is the time to more fully open the door to these opportunities.”

The GOP devotion to free trade could be the party’s Achilles’ heel next year as Republicans try to hold on to the Senate majority they worked so hard to win in 2012. One Democratic strategist, quoted anonymously by *The Hill*, likened trade agreements to landmines. “Forget party or the politician. In this cycle, trade deals like TPP are political landmines — support them and your political career likely goes bye-bye,” the strategist predicted. “It’s a simple matter of trust: Voters don’t trust trade deals, and they don’t trust politicians when they say ‘trust us, this trade deal is different.’”

All of which could mean that Mitch McConnell’s “out-of-body experience” in working with Obama on the latest trade deal could result in an out-of-Senate experience for several of his Republican colleagues next year.



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