

# ***Talking to Mr. Cuellar***

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Pro-trade Texas Democrat Henry Cuellar thinks Congress will approve the TransPacific Partnership this year – but with relatively little support from his fellow Democrats who are under pressure from organized labor to oppose the trade deal (WTD, 1/25/16).

The 28 House Democrats who voted for Trade Promotion Authority last year so that President Obama could conclude the TPP are sure “yes” votes, Mr. Cuellar told WTD in an interview Friday. “The 28 are going to stick,” he said. “I have talked to a lot of them. They are not going to flip flop.”

But how many more Democrats will vote for TPP in the end remains unclear at this point, according to Mr. Cuellar. Where the votes are will become clearer over the next month or so. It will be up to Republican Congressional leaders to decide when the vote on TPP will take place.

Mr. Cuellar said he would prefer to see a vote come in the “May, June or July” period, even though Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky) is urging a vote in a post-election “lame duck” session.

“There is some risk to waiting until after the elections,” Mr. Cuellar said. Some members will want to put off a vote on TPP even longer – until a new President takes office.

Further complicating a “lame duck” vote is the fact that most of the Presidential candidates – from both political parties – oppose TPP. Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton has been careful in her comments about the TPP, saying that she has concerns, rather than outright opposing the deal like Sen. Bernie Sanders, he noted. Mr. Cuellar pointed out that Ms. Clinton called the TPP a “gold standard” agreement when she was President Obama’s Secretary of State.

### **June or July**

While he can understand the rationale for waiting until after the elections, Mr. Cuellar said he prefers an early summer vote. “If we have the votes in June or July, I would say let’s go for it at that time.”

Mr. Cuellar – who is a member of the moderate House New Democrat Coalition – said he talked last year to Democrats who opposed TPA but indicated they were open to supporting TPP depending on the shape of the final package. He is hoping that those members will end up voting for TPP.

But “a lot depends on how much pressure traditional democratic constituencies keep on lawmakers to vote against the TPP,” Mr. Cuellar told WTD. The unions are doing a good job in rallying support against the deal. And if they keep the pressure up, some Democrats who are now leaning toward TPP might end up voting against it.

When talking to fellow Democrats about the TPP – particularly freshmen and second term members who say they are getting pressure from organized labor to oppose the deal – Mr. Cuellar said he uses his own experiences to reassure them. He first took a pro-trade stand as a new member himself on the US-Central America free trade agreement – despite strong pressure from unions to vote against it.

Even though he had an 88-percent positive voting record with organized labor, “it didn’t matter,” Mr. Cuellar said. “They tried to make an example of me over CAFTA. They came after me. They spent millions against me.”

Organized labor is taking the same stand on the TPP, warning members that they will withhold support and financial contributions. Mr. Cuellar said he does not blame organized labor for taking that stand. He acknowledges that there are “winners and losers” in any trade deal.

Mr. Cuellar tells colleagues worried about voting for the TPP that he survived union anger over his pro-trade stances. “You’re not going to lose an election because of a trade vote. That’s never happened before as far as I know. If you lose, it’s going to be for other reasons.”

Mr. Cuellar acknowledged that he has a “general, philosophical disagreement” with his own political party when it comes to trade. “It’s a mistake for my party to be anti-trade, point blank.” Democrats should be supportive of the TPP in particular because it has the strongest worker rights and environmental protection provisions of any trade agreement, the member said. The Obama Administration has done a “good, good job” in the TPP on those issues, which should appeal to Democrats.

### **Arguments in Favor of TPP**

Mr. Cuellar also makes other arguments in favor of the TPP – such as the economic benefits of having duty-free access to the fast-growing Asia-Pacific region and the importance of the United States writing the rules for global trade. “What I tell my Democratic friends is – If you want to have a say so in how the world rules are in trade, you’ve got to participate. If you isolate yourself, somebody else is going to fill the vacuum. And if it’s not us, it’s going to be China or someone else.”

At the end of the day “all politics is local,” Mr. Cuellar remarked. How members vote on TPP will depend on whether their districts will benefit or be hurt by the agreement. Mr. Cuellar told WTD his own free-trade views come from the fact that his district includes Laredo – which is the largest inland port in the United States. Almost half of the \$1.3-billion in US trade does with Mexico moves through his port.

Mr. Cuellar said he is urging business groups to be more involved at the district and local level in explaining the benefits of the agreement. Otherwise, Democratic lawmakers will be making up their minds based only on what they hear from unions.