

# San Antonio Express-News

## Editorial: A free trade retreat poses danger to U.S.

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In a national referendum on Oct. 7, Costa Rican voters narrowly put their stamp of approval on the principles of free trade. The question now is whether a U.S. Congress led by Democrats will show the same common sense.

The Costa Rican vote was an important affirmation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement. No nation has ever rejected a free trade pact with the United States. Despite intense opposition from domestic labor unions and unusual foreign lobbying against the deal by American congressmen, 51.5 percent of voters endorsed free trade.

The timing of the referendum was critical. Fueled by a windfall of petrodollars, Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chávez is pushing a populist and socialist alternative to capitalism and free markets in Latin America. The developing world is littered with economic basket cases that have pursued that course.

But a throng of Democrats in Congress and an increasing number of Republicans are doing their best to push our Western Hemispheric neighbors down that failed path. Free trade agreements with Peru, Panama and Colombia have languished in Congress for months, along with a trade pact with South Korea, which has the world's 11th largest economy.

Last month, a group of prominent Democratic leaders — including Henry Cisneros — sent a letter to their partisan friends in Congress warning them that their retreat from free trade would set back U.S. interests in the region for a generation. And failure to move forward on the agreements will hurt the United States more than its trading partners.

"The fact is," they wrote, "that the United States is already virtually open to products from Colombia, Panama and Peru through unilateral trade preference programs, but those economies do not give reciprocal benefits to the United States. Far from being 'job killing,' these trade agreements would open markets wider to U.S. goods and services and therefore support jobs in the United States."

No trade agreement is perfect. No economic system is perfect. There will always be some winners and some losers.

On balance, however, there are far more winners and fewer losers in a system of free markets and free trade than with any of the alternatives. A majority of Costa Rican voters understands that, even if a majority of the current Congress doesn't.