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Finishing up the free trade pacts

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Pending a recount, it appears that Costa Rican voters have approved a free trade pact with the United States. The vote was only 52 percent in favor but the treaty had been widely forecast to fail. The fact that it did not is a victory for both nations.

Over the weekend, the White House said that the United States would not renegotiate the treaty if it failed and, overreaching, it said rejection could cost Costa Rica its existing trade preferences. That was an excessively thuggish thing to say to a small - population 4.5 million - peaceful, pro-U.S. democracy.

The pact will have tangible benefits for Costa Rica and more intangible benefits for the U.S. You can make the case that free trade is running out of steam in Congress, and in the heated atmosphere of an election year, it's hard to make the case for the undeniable benefits of free trade.

Costa Rica was the last piece in the Central American Free Trade Agreement, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua having already signed on. If Costa Rica had convincingly rejected the treaty, it might have significantly slowed three other trade agreements awaiting action by Congress.

An agreement with Peru easily passed the Senate Finance and House Ways and Means committees after Charles Rangel, the chairman of the House committee, assured Democrats that the labor standards in the Peruvian pact were adequate.

But pending agreements with Colombia and South Korea face higher hurdles, opposition in specifics from organized labor and opposition in principle from isolationists. Colombia faces an additional obstacle - human rights advocates who say President Alvaro Uribe, who has his hands full battling narcoterrorists, has done an inadequate job cracking down on human rights abuses.

With Venezuela's Hugo Chavez seeking to undermine U.S. influence in Latin America while spreading his crackpot form of socialism, now is not the time to stiff a friendly and embattled Colombia. Approving a deal with South Korea is simply economic self-interest.

Congress should show it is equally as brave as Costa Rica's voters.

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