

Pelosi plays politics

She's doing right by her party by blocking the Colombia trade pact. But it's the wrong thing for the country.

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In finagling House rules to block a vote on a free trade agreement with Colombia, Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco) has done well by her party. The pact is opposed by unions and therefore is opposed by both Democratic presidential candidates, who are courting labor votes. But because its economic benefits are plain, a vote would force Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York to choose between politics and the national interest. Pelosi's solution: stall.

That's not her stated reason, of course. Instead, she and other critics of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement claim, for instance, that it would further damage the U.S. economy. Nonsense. The economy is teetering because of a meltdown in the housing market, a credit squeeze that hampers business growth and a pullback by consumers that weakens retailers. Increasing exports of beef and frozen French fries to Bogota will not drive more sub-prime borrowers into foreclosure in Boise.

To the contrary, the agreement creates balance in a policy that is lopsided. Most of Colombia's exports to the U.S. are not subject to tariffs, while U.S. goods face taxes of up to 35%. Reducing tariffs in both countries is good for Colombia, but it's even better for the U.S. -- and, we might add, especially critical in Pelosi's home state.

Another argument is that Colombia remains a dangerous place for union organizers, and it should not be rewarded until it can ensure their safety. This is a valid concern, but Colombia has made real progress: It has instituted special protections for union organizers, created an office in its department of justice to reduce the backlog of murder cases and stepped up the pace of criminal convictions.

Halting the vote wasn't about the U.S. economy and it wasn't about Colombia. It was politics. That's to be expected from Washington in an election year, but Pelosi's partisan considerations should not override her national duty. She should schedule a vote on the agreement, and Congress should approve it.