

THE PLAIN DEALER

Protectionism wins cheers, but open markets provide jobs

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The benefits of trade

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Everyone knows that Ohio has lost about 300,000 manufacturing jobs over the past 20 years. Most everyone also would agree that competition from foreign products, often made by people who earn far less than Ohioans, has contributed to those job losses. That has led some politicians to scapegoat overseas competitors for the complex set of factors - notably technology-driven productivity gains - that have affected this state's manufacturers and their employees.

What many people don't seem to realize is that trade is a two-way street that has kept those job losses from being a whole lot worse. Data compiled by [the U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) suggest that in 2005, more than 300,000 Ohio manufacturing jobs were dependent on the state's \$38 billion worth of exports. That was more than one in three of Ohio's remaining manufacturing jobs. In addition, some 204,000 Ohioans worked for foreign-owned companies; Honda alone employs 16,000 of them.

Those numbers suggest that trade is less a villain than a key to rebuilding Ohio's manufacturing sector. The same is true across the country. That's why America needs to pursue lower tariffs and open markets around the world.

Unfortunately, recent polls find Americans of both parties leery of trade. That's especially true in the Democratic presidential field. Cleveland's Dennis Kucinich has always displayed a protectionist streak that wins cheers at union events, but now it's spreading to contenders who actually might win the White House. Even Sen. Hillary Clinton, whose husband pushed open trade with vigor and counted it as a key reason for the economic expansion of the 1990s, has voted against recent trade agreements and says it's more important to review and even revise old deals than to negotiate new ones.

Some of this may be simple election-year rhetoric. Bill Clinton's 1992 talk of linking trade to human rights evaporated when he got into office.

But the obvious hostility to trade in many quarters of the electorate threatens the long-term health of the American economy. Our global competitors, notably the European Union, keep looking for new markets. Emerging economies get it, too: Costa Rica just ratified the Central America Free Trade Agreement in a national referendum.

The United States must be as prudent. Rather than propping up uncompetitive industries, public policy ought to encourage innovative products and elevated skills among American workers. A new social compact needs to help individuals and regions hurt by economic transformation, whatever the cause. Yes, the United States must enforce existing trade agreements - this page supported action against steel dumpers - but it also needs to pursue new opportunities.

Four trade deals now await congressional action. Pacts with Peru and Panama ought to be no-brainers, even for trade skeptics; Democrat Charles Rangel, chairman of the House Ways and

Means Committee, went to Lima to work out labor and environmental language in the Peru deal. The deal with Korea would open a large and growing economy to U.S. firms and should pass, too.

The most problematic pending deal is with Colombia, where President Alvaro Uribe needs to do more against right-wing paramilitaries. But increased trade might give America more leverage on that front, even as it helps Colombia resist both internal narcotics gangs and the entreaties of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Open markets breed open minds. That's good for America and Ohio.