

A few years ago a wise pollster—pondering how labels like left-wing and right-wing have been scrambled by globalisation—came up with a different way to sort voters in Western democracies. Electorates, he suggested, broadly divide into two groups, one of which sees change and the outside world as a threat, and a second which takes a more optimistic view, looking for opportunities to harness global forces and turn them to good ends. The pollster, Stefan Shakespeare of YouGov, calls these two camps “Drawbridge Up” and “Drawbridge Down” people.

Just after lunch on June 12th President Barack Obama was mugged by the Drawbridge Up bit of America, or at least by its elected representatives. A large majority of Democrats in the House of Representatives, joined by hard-right Republicans, voted to stall (and potentially kill) his hopes of reaching a big new free-trade pact between America and 11 other Pacific Rim nations, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The Senate has already passed a bill that would allow Mr Obama to press ahead with TPP, and the House may return to the question as early as Tuesday.

Reflecting how trade scrambles partisan positions, Mr Obama is strongly supported by Republican leaders in Congress and their business allies. But Republicans are sufficiently divided that without substantial backing from moderate Democrats, TPP cannot happen.

Opposition to the president’s trade agenda involves an odd alliance between Democrats who distrust global trade and Republican hardliners who distrust Mr Obama and resent being asked to give him more authority to do anything. Some hard-right members of Congress go further, accusing the president of plotting to use TPP to rewrite immigration laws and regulate the economy in the name of fighting climate change (despite promises from Republican leaders that Congress can block such power-grabs).

Friday’s vote was preceded by a high-profile act of rebellion by the Democratic leader in the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, who broke weeks of silence over trade to call on members to “slow down” Mr Obama’s trade agenda.

For her part Hillary Clinton, the would-be Democratic presidential nominee, maintained her own deafening silence on whether she supports Mr Obama on trade. By keeping quiet Mrs Clinton gave Democratic members of Congress cover to rebel against the current inhabitant of the White House—an act of political calculation that distanced her from the political legacy of her own husband, Bill Clinton, who as president browbeat Democrats into supporting the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The legislative points at issue on Friday were at times arcane, but the political message that Congress sent to Mr Obama was brutally simple. Just hours after the president travelled to Capitol Hill to lobby House Democrats in person (making his first trip to lobby Congress in two years), a majority of Mr Obama’s own party bowed to those voters who think that increased trade with Asia is something to fear, and that working Americans cannot trust their government to put their interests ahead of those of big corporations.

Do most members of Congress privately agree with Drawbridge Up America? Almost certainly not. Indeed a symbolic vote later in the afternoon revealed that a majority in the House of Representatives (including 28 Democrats) would be willing to allow Mr Obama to press ahead with negotiations on a trade pact with Asia. That symbolic vote was in favour of granting the president Trade Promotion Authority (TPA), traditionally known as fast-track trade authority, under which Congress waives its rights to re-open and re-write any trade pact agreed with foreign governments. When TPA is in force, Congress is only allowed to accept or reject finished trade deals, and cannot amend them. Trade advocates call that a vital tool for assuring foreign partners that America is negotiating in good faith, and will not come back for extra concessions once ministers and envoys have done a deal.

But regardless of what members of Congress believe personally, trade unions and left-wing grassroots campaign groups have done an effective job of intimidating House Democrats into a defensive crouch on trade, threatening to punish members who defy them by withholding campaign funds and help from grassroots activists.

Union bosses, populist Democrats and some populist Republicans crowed with triumph after Friday's votes, saying that TPA had to be stopped to prevent more jobs from being outsourced to Asia, and—in the words of Richard Trumka, the president of the vast AFL-CIO union—to “send a message that our government belongs not to the highest corporate bidders but to the working people who make our country run.”

Opponents of Mr Obama's plans for global trade have no trouble painting a picture of how they would like the world to function. Mr Trumka says that working America wants “fair wages, safe working conditions and a real opportunity to compete in the global economy.” Mrs Pelosi told House colleagues that: “Whatever the deal is with other countries, we want a better deal for America's workers.”

Opponents do not offer concrete suggestions about how America might unilaterally achieve much more favourable conditions for its workers in an age of intense global competition. They are conspicuously uninterested in trying to recruit foreign governments as allies. Instead they attack Mr Obama for failing to sue foreign governments often enough over their local environmental and labour standards. They accuse previous trade pacts of hollowing out American manufacturing (though as trade defenders note, America has no free-trade deal with China, and that did nothing to slow China's rise as an export powerhouse). Above all, they scorn the argument that lowering barriers to trade might be to the benefit of a large, rich, innovative country such as America.

The irony is that—in presidential elections at least—Democrats rely increasingly on the votes from Drawbridge Down bits of America to win. The Obama coalition that handed the White House to Democrats in 2008 and 2012 is built on groups whose members stand out in opinion polls for their confidence that free trade helps the country more than it hurts it, such as college graduates and non-whites. Meanwhile Democrats have already lost many of the blue-collar white voters who are most sceptical of trade (and whose

relative weight in the electorate goes down with each passing year). Alas, in congressional elections those same shifting demographic forces work differently. Non-whites and other Obama fans, such as the young, rarely vote in non-presidential contests, leaving Republicans to pick up blue-collar white districts that once elected centrist Democrats. That has left the Democratic Party smaller and more uniformly left-wing, which helps to explain why today's House members are taking such a sceptical line on trade with Asia.

Barack Obama faces a showdown with his party over trade

Republican leaders in the House have effectively given Mr Obama three days to persuade a few more of his members to back him. By his somewhat chilly standards the president has already been on a charm offensive with House Democrats for weeks, flying chosen members on Air Force One and even dropping in on the annual congressional baseball game on June 11th. Mr Obama has promised to campaign for any members who face rebellions in their home districts as a result of backing him on trade. That promise has less potency than it once did.

Meanwhile Mrs Pelosi is demanding that Republicans bribe Democratic members to support TPA and TAA (which pass together in a single bill, for procedural reasons, to avoid a conflict with the bill already passed by the Senate). In a letter to her members, Mrs Pelosi says the prospects of a trade bill passing would be "greatly improved" if Republicans were to support a big package of federal funding for highways and other transportation infrastructure. It is unclear whether Mrs Pelosi is offering a lifeline by suggesting this price for her help: many Republicans may find her intervention deeply provocative.

A Democratic member of Congress thinks there is a "decent" chance the trade measures could still be revived, not least because business and pro-trade lobbies now know how important TAA is to getting a deal done, and will push Republicans harder to back it.

Asian allies could be forgiven for watching this debate with despair, as Mr Obama's grand strategy for rebalancing America's economic and strategic focus towards the Pacific region is bogged down by rows about crumbling interstate bridges. China is not one of the 12 countries in the TPP pact, and Chinese leaders would love to think that America's democracy is too dysfunctional to offer Asia an alternative model of economic governance. Congress does not have long to prove foreign friends and rivals wrong.