

Extra Feature Story

Free Trade Agreement is Key Issue for Ohio Voters

March 3, 2008

Democratic rivals Sen. Hillary Clinton and Sen. Barack Obama have accused each other of supporting the NAFTA trade agreement in an attempt to sway working-class voters in Ohio.

The North American Free Trade Agreement, also known as NAFTA, was a hot topic during the most recent debate between the two senators, who are battling to become the Democratic Party's presidential nominee.

Both candidates said they would renegotiate the free trade agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"I will say to Mexico that we will opt out of NAFTA unless we renegotiate it," said Clinton.

"We need to use the hammer of potential opt-out as leverage to get environmental and labor standards enforced," Obama said.

Obama also said, "I don't think NAFTA has been good for Americans, and I never have." He has accused Clinton not being consistent on trade.

"Sen. Clinton also said I'm wrong to point out that she once supported NAFTA. But the fact is, she was saying great things about NAFTA until she started running for president," Obama said.

What is NAFTA?

NAFTA was signed into law in 1994 during President Bill Clinton's first term in office. The law eliminates most tariffs -- or import taxes -- on goods and services bought or sold between the three countries: Mexico, Canada and the United States.

And while most economists believe NAFTA has been good for the American economy as a whole, it has hurt some industries and regions.

In Ohio, where many factories have closed and unemployment is high, labor groups say NAFTA sent U.S. jobs to foreign competitors.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the state has lost more than 200,000 manufacturing jobs since 2000.

Thea Lee, policy director of one of America's biggest unions, the AFL-CIO, says NAFTA resulted in poorer conditions for workers because company owners could threaten to move factories to Mexico if the union did not agree to lower wages and fewer health benefits.

But not all economists blame NAFTA for Ohio's economy woes.

Ned Hill, economic development professor at Cleveland State University believes job losses were due to bad decisions by the three big American car makers: General Motors, Ford and Chrysler.

"That is not due to NAFTA. That is because of the failed strategy of three companies," he told National Public Radio.

The candidates' records

Although the Democratic candidates are sparring about NAFTA, their voting records are virtually the same, National Public Radio reported.

Neither was a member of Congress when it was enacted and therefore did not vote on the law when it was originally passed. And both Clinton and Obama have voted for most free trade deals.

The Republicans

Presumptive Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain of Arizona said any attempt to renegotiate NAFTA could be seen by Canada as a betrayal and could impact its military support in Afghanistan.

"One of our greatest assets in Afghanistan are our Canadian friends. We need our Canadian friends, and we need their continued support in Afghanistan," McCain said at a town hall meeting in Round Rock, Texas.

The Democrats' plans to renegotiate would be a "betrayal of the long years of negotiations that we agreed to," he added.

President Bush also joined the fray, noting that NAFTA has had a very positive impact on the economy.

"You know, one statistic I think people need to know is there's roughly \$380 billion worth of goods that we ship to our NAFTA partners on an annual basis," Mr. Bush said the Canadian Press reported.

"And the idea of just unilaterally withdrawing from a trade treaty because of, you know, trying to score political points is not good policy," he added.

Why Ohio is important

Stakes are high in Ohio for the Democrats. Hillary Clinton needs solid wins in the delegate-rich states of both Ohio (141 delegates) and Texas (193) to continue to be viable, according to many political analysts.

Barack Obama has won 11 consecutive contests since Super Tuesday last month and leads in the delegate count.

"I think, quite honestly, that if Obama wins Texas -- and I think it looks good for him there -- if he comes here and wins Ohio, then I think it's over," syndicated columnist Mark Shields told the NewsHour.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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