

Candidates Court Trade Skeptics

By Jonathan Weisman
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It is not as if Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton have shied away from discussing the North American Free Trade Agreement, President Bush's proposed trade deal with Columbia or the impact on America of economic globalization. But with many undecided House Democratic superdelegates still unsatisfied, both Democratic presidential candidates have been quietly trolling for support among trade skeptics.

Two weeks ago, Clinton met for an hour and a half with as many as 20 members of the House's Trade Working Group. Late Friday afternoon, Obama carried on for more than an hour on a conference call with a smaller number of group members. The meetings, organized by undecided Reps. Michael H. Michaud (D-Maine) and Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio) covered issues that would likely enrage business groups -- and even some Democratic economists -- if made public.

Obama and Clinton gave their word that, if elected in November, they would work against passage of the Columbia Free Trade agreement if there is a lame duck session of Congress, Michaud said. The candidates were also pushed on alleged Chinese currency manipulation, the future of the World Trade Organization, patent legislation pending in Congress and value-added taxes paid in Europe that effectively double-tax U.S. exports.

But if the candidates were hoping for a raft of new endorsements, they will apparently be disappointed. Michaud said he is still awaiting written answers to questions -- ones the candidates would not or could not offer up in person. Rep. Brad Miller, whose state of North Carolina goes to the polls Tuesday, said he would not endorse until his constituents have spoken.

Miller said he still believes Obama will be the party's nominee. He may have problems with white, working-class voters, but in the Democratic primary, "beer drinkers votes and wine drinkers votes count exactly the same," Miller said.

Miller said he was impressed how much Obama understood manufacturing policy and how fluidly he could speak on trade and industrial issues.

But, he added, "Certainly in the fall, if he does become our nominee -- as appears likely - - he needs to convey to those voters not just that he understands the details of the policy, but to speak to those voters and impress upon them that he understands not just intellectually but in his gut that he knows what these voters are going through."