

OREGON FAIR TRADE CAMPAIGN

OR-FTC

Trade in the 2008 Elections

Trade played an unprecedented role in Oregon's 2008 U.S. Senate race, and an important role in dozens of other races throughout the nation. In Oregon, more than a dozen separate television ads featured trade messaging in 2008. Candidates who highlighted their "fair trade" positions did extremely well in Oregon and elsewhere, often beating long-time incumbents.

Trade Was a Key Issue in Oregon's U.S. Senate Race

Trade was the single biggest policy issue highlighted in Jeff Merkley's successful campaign for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Gordon Smith. The majority of Merkley's major television ads featured trade messaging. No other single issue, including health care, the war in Iraq, or middle class tax cuts, received as much attention.

During the primary, the Merkley campaign's earliest handbills argued that, "Jeff Merkley, whose father worked in Oregon's sawmills, knows first-hand it's time to crack down on big corporations outsourcing American jobs and create economic opportunity for every Oregon worker right here at home." These ideas were expanded upon in early campaign press releases and position papers.

This messaging intensified further during the general election, with the Merkley campaign producing and airing television ads referencing trade in the following ways:

- Merkley's "Places" ad featured narration promising, "As U.S. Senator, Merkley will fight to end trade deals that ship our jobs overseas."
- Merkley's "A Decade" ad featured voiceover asking, "In this economy, who's really on your side? Gordon Smith and Washington? A decade of no accountability; tax breaks for billionaires; shipping our jobs overseas."
- Merkley's "Breaks" ad also criticized Gordon Smith and George Bush for giving, "Billions and billion in tax breaks for... corporations who ship jobs overseas."
- Merkley's "Tax and Trade" ad featured the candidate arguing that tax cuts should go to middle class families, but that, "Instead, Washington has been giving tax breaks to corporations that ship our jobs overseas. Imagine. Spending your tax dollars to export Oregon jobs and subsidize companies building factories in China

and Mexico.”

- Merkley’s “Call It” ad featured the candidate saying, “They call it ‘free’ trade. Problem is, there’s nothing ‘free’ about it. And Oregon’s paid a very heavy price with nearly 70,000 jobs shipped overseas. Families with no savings, no health care, and no security. How could Washington allow American jobs to become one of our country’s biggest exports?”
- Merkley’s end-of-the-race “Important Message” ad featured Barack Obama saying, “Jeff will put fairness back in the system and strengthen our economy by cutting taxes for the middle class, not corporations who ship our jobs overseas.”
- Merkley’s “Why” ad criticized Smith for voting with George Bush “to ship our jobs overseas.”
- Even Merkley’s artsy “Trailer” ad—which featured no voiceover, but posed the on-screen question, “who’s fighting for Oregon?”—led with the point, “bringing back our jobs.”
- Merkley’s “Stories” ad also promised to “bring back good paying jobs.”

No other candidate in Oregon’s recent election history has produced nine separate television ads featuring trade messaging. This astoundingly high number may very well be the most in U.S. Senate history.

In addition, the national Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee’s advertisements in Oregon at times referenced trade. Two of the DSCC’s earliest television ads in Oregon attacked incumbent Senator Smith for supporting tax policies that reward the offshoring of American jobs. The ad “Long” criticized Smith as “responsible for tax breaks to companies that ship our jobs overseas,” while the ad “Losing Ground” claimed, “In Oregon, Gordon Smith talks about common ground, while working families are losing ground because in Washington Smith has stood with George Bush and the special interests, supporting tax breaks for companies that shift jobs overseas.”

Other groups, such as Patriot Majority, also ran television and radio ads in the Oregon that referenced trade in regards to the Senate race.

Trade Messaging Also Made an Appearance in Some Unexpected Races

During the Presidential primary, Oregon-winner Barack Obama also aired television ads in-state that referenced trade themes. One such ad, “Enough,” featured the candidate saying, “Ordinary people all across the country are struggling from paycheck to paycheck. If the plant moves to China, and you’ve been working there for 20, 30 years and suddenly you have the rug pulled out from under you. And you don’t have healthcare, and you don’t have a pension, you’re on your own. We gotta stop giving tax

breaks to companies that are moving overseas and give those tax breaks to companies that are investing right here in the United States of America.”

Perhaps more indicative of just how important trade was during the 2008 election cycle were ads in the Oregon State Treasurer’s race and the 5th District Congressional race that referenced offshoring without even being about trade policy:

- An ad attacking Republican State Treasurer candidate Allen Alley highlighted that “[Alley] says he created jobs in Oregon, but really he outsourced jobs to China while paying himself millions of dollars.” The visual featured a cartoon depiction of Alley with a stack of money standing next to a factory in China.
- An ad by Democrat Kurt Schrader, who did not make trade policy a central part of his campaign, still made reference to an economic recovery plan that includes “job training for renewable energy jobs that can never be outsourced.” The visual on the screen was not about protecting the environment, reducing energy costs or even improving the economy generally. Instead, it very specifically read “Kurt Schrader: Jobs That Can Never Be Outsourced.”

Trade Messages Expanded into Clear Policy Positions

The sound-bite “fair trade” messages of Jeff Merkley’s television ads were expanded into very clear policy positions on the Merkley campaign website.

In November 2007, for instance, the campaign issued a press statement opposing the then-pending Peru Free Trade Agreement, stating that, “The Peru Trade Agreement contains several fatal flaws that would cost Oregon jobs, lock farmers and ranchers into a competitive disadvantage, and replace domestic products with imports at a time when our trade deficit is crippling our economy.”

Among other things, the statement specifically criticized the pact for:

- “Extending NAFTA’s provisions that give foreign investors more rights than Americans to sue the federal and state governments... Enabling foreign investors to challenge American public health, environmental, zoning and labor protections in foreign courts.”
- “Blocking government procurement rules that require the hiring of U.S. workers and ‘Buy American’ provisions.”
- “Setting limits on food safety standards that require the U.S. to rely on foreign regulators and inspectors.”

Around the same time, the campaign posted “Merkley’s Plan to Create Quality Jobs” on its website. The seven-point plan’s first two points were to “Cancel or fix unfair trade

deals” and to “End federal giveaways to companies that ship jobs overseas.” Each point was fleshed out with further explanation.

In August 2008, Merkley formally stated his opposition to the pending Free Trade Agreements with Panama, Colombia and South Korea and to the direction of the “Doha Round” of negotiations within the World Trade Organization. He also expressed his support for comprehensive trade reform legislation called the Trade, Reform, Accountability, Development and Employment Act.

Trade a Winning Issue in Oregon—and Across the Nation

Candidates who ran on “fair trade” platforms won big across the nation—with at least 41 new fair-trade U.S. Senators and Representatives elected to office. Seventeen “free trade” Congressional incumbents were defeated, with additional races won by fair traders for open seats and in special elections. At the time of this writing, additional races have still not been called.

Despite being outspent by an approximately 3-to-1 margin, Jeff Merkley was the first U.S. Senate candidate from Oregon to unseat an incumbent Senator in four decades. Merkley embraced trade messaging early and used it heavily throughout his entire campaign—something for which both his opponent and media pundits criticized him. In an election where the economy became a top voting issue for much of the electorate, sticking with “fair trade” messaging was clearly a winning strategy for Merkley in what proved to be a very tight race.

Also noteworthy was Merkley’s improved showing in rural, Republican-stronghold counties when compared to Democrat Steve Bradbury’s 2002 run against Smith. An informal ORFTC analysis of early election results showed that Merkley’s statewide margin of victory over Smith could be accounted for almost entirely by the increase of votes he received in the conservative second Congressional district in comparison to Bradbury in 2002. While some of this improvement may have been accounted for by 2008 being a Presidential year, the fact that second district Democratic Congressional candidate Noah Lemas got nowhere near the votes Merkley received demonstrates conclusively that voters often split their tickets—and found reason to do so in favor of Merkley.

Others whose campaigns featured trade messaging also won in Oregon—including Barack Obama in both the primary and general elections and Ben Westlund in the State Treasurer race over Allen Alley.

Steps Taken to Increase the Profile of Trade as an Election Issue

After witnessing trade used as an election issue in dozens of Congressional races outside of Oregon in 2006, the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign’s steering committee made a

conscious decision to highlight the potential of trade as a potential election issue here in Oregon. This work was carried out in a completely nonpartisan way, to raise the profile of the issue, rather than to aid any particular candidate.

In the summer of 2007, ORFTC published a pamphlet on “Trade and Elections.” The pamphlet summarized how trade was successfully used as an election issue in races throughout the country in 2006; provided talking points on trade pacts’ impact in Oregon; and highlighted the voting records of Oregon incumbents. ORFTC compiled a list of more than 50 Oregon-based PAC leaders, bloggers and others and directly mailed them the pamphlet as soon as it was printed. Hundreds of additional copies were distributed at ORFTC events and meetings over the remainder of the year.

Throughout 2007 and 2008, ORFTC staff published blog articles on Blue Oregon, Loaded Orygun and elsewhere highlighting the potential of trade as an election issue. Some of the earlier articles were ghost-written for standing columnists.

In late 2007 and early 2008, the ORFTC steering committee conducted face-to-face interviews with Senate candidates Jeff Merkley, Steve Novick and John Fronmayer. (Gordon Smith did not respond to an invitation.) In addition, ORFTC prepared a packet of materials on trade’s impact in Oregon and the coalition’s views on various policy proposals, which we shared with all the Senate campaigns. ORFTC held additional meetings directly briefing those campaigns that were interested.

ORFTC staff and volunteers prepared and distributed thousands of leaflets and “NO to NAFTA” lapel stickers during Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama’s primary visits to Oregon throughout the first half of 2008.

ORFTC distributed a candidate questionnaire to Presidential candidates in the spring of 2008, which was returned by Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Ron Paul. A similar candidate questionnaire was distributed to Senatorial candidates in the summer, and returned by Jeff Merkley. The questionnaire responses were published on the ORFTC website and highlighted in press releases. The responses were also used to prepared issue guides for the Presidential and Senatorial races, which were distributed to all ORFTC member organizations and sent on several occasions to ORFTC’s email list.

In 2008, ORFTC organized community forums in Medford, Salem and Portland that featured the testimony of displaced workers and highlighted the connections between trade policies and local job loss. The last such forum, held in October, featured Jeff Merkley. (Gordon Smith declined to participate.)

Throughout 2008, ORFTC organized and participated in additional rallies and press events designed to highlight the connections between trade policy, local job loss and other negative effects. Targeted earned media outreach generated over a dozen stories in the month prior to the election, and more than 40 stories in the three months prior to the election—with many additional stories earlier in the year.

For More Information

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