

McCain stumps strategists by playing up his unpopular stance on free trade

The candidate may be trying to show that his convictions about NAFTA are independent of public opinion or that rival Barack Obama is 'irresponsible' to oppose the policy.

By Maeve Reston, Staff Writer
Los Angeles Times
June 20, 2008

With Americans increasingly anxious about the effects of trade on the sinking economy, John McCain heads to Canada today, where he plans to herald free trade and argue that Barack Obama's "protectionist" policies could be harmful to U.S. alliances.

McCain's advisors believe the border crossing will show McCain in his best light -- as a leader on the world stage unafraid to embrace an unpopular position and optimistic about the new jobs that trade could create.

But some political analysts wondered why McCain would choose to highlight his position in attention-grabbing trips -- whether to Canada or to economically depressed areas like Youngstown, Ohio. The Arizona senator's campaign needs to win the support of independent voters, many of them blue-collar workers worried that the North American Free Trade Agreement will cost them their jobs.

Bill Carrick, a Democratic strategist who supports Obama, said that a strong defense of NAFTA has never been "a vote-getter in any context."

"If I was the Obama campaign, I'd send them money and say, 'Please do a straight-talk trade tour of Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana and Michigan,' " he said.

McCain's support for free trade is backed by many economists and widely shared by GOP lawmakers, but the downturn in the economy has soured many Americans on it. Half the voters surveyed last month in a Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll said that free international trade had hurt the economy, while only 26% said that it had helped. That skepticism was even more pronounced among working-class voters with less than a college education. And even among conservative Republican voters, 43% said it was harmful, compared with 38% who said international trade helped the economy.

"I'm not sure what he's thinking he will gain," said Bernie Porn, an independent pollster based in Lansing, Mich. "Maybe he and his strategists think this shows that McCain is willing to tell people what they don't want to hear. But he did that in the primary in

Michigan -- he said those jobs that have left, they're never coming back -- and Mitt Romney won Michigan."

The McCain campaign, however, believes the contrast between Obama and McCain on the trade issue may be one of the sharpest in the months ahead and believes McCain can persuade voters that his approach would benefit the country in the long run.

"The American economy cannot be closed off and shut down to the world," said strategist Steve Schmidt. "No matter how appealing a poll may suggest that policy is, it's demagogic, and Sen. Obama is engaging in it. It's unfortunate, because it is not a serious path to growing the economy."

McCain has supported every major piece of trade legislation since 2001. Obama, who voted against the Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2005, has backed bilateral trade agreements since he was elected to the Senate in 2004. Schmidt said he is "trying to have it both ways" by opposing some trade agreements but making the case that he is a free trader.

McCain pounced on the issue this year after Obama and New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton pledged to renegotiate NAFTA. In a February debate, Obama said the United States should "use the hammer of a potential opt-out as leverage to ensure that we actually get labor and environmental standards that are enforced."

That week, McCain told reporters that his opponents' willingness to unilaterally change the treaty would send "the wrong message to the world" and could prompt Canada to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, where they are fighting alongside U.S. forces.

The next month in Youngstown, Ohio, McCain suggested that Clinton and Obama were sounding "the siren song of protectionism," which he said would have devastating effects on the economy.

McCain's campaign contended that Obama softened his tone this week as an acknowledgment that he went too far in the primary. In Fortune magazine, Obama agreed with his interviewer that rhetoric on NAFTA was "overheated and amplified" and stressed that he would open a dialogue with Canada and Mexico to make NAFTA "work for all people."

On the Canada trip, the McCain campaign will also have a chance to draw attention to an embarrassing episode for Obama this year when one of his aides told Canadian officials not to pay attention to the Illinois senator's rhetoric on NAFTA.

Daniel Griswold, director of the pro-trade Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, argued that McCain's position on trade "isn't going to win him a big chunk of votes, but it isn't going to lose him votes either." He continued: "People talk a lot about trade. They have a lot of opinions, but it doesn't seem to sway many votes."

If McCain is persuasive about the broader economic impact of pulling back from trade agreements, Griswold said, voters may see Obama's earlier position as "irresponsible."

McCain's aides declined to discuss their internal polling on trade issues. But officials at the Republican National Committee, which is working closely with the campaign, said they believe McCain's argument will resonate in states such as Washington and Oregon that have benefited from trade.

John C. Green, a professor of political science at the University of Akron, suggested that McCain could also be trying to attract voters in the agricultural pockets of Ohio, Iowa and Wisconsin, where farmers rely on exports.

In a campaign that may be fought over the margins in states such as Ohio, Green said, McCain's aides may also believe they can pick off affluent independent voters.

While many people in Ohio are angry about U.S. trade agreements, Green said, "many of them are likely to vote Democratic anyway." McCain's arguments may be more palatable among professionals and small-business people in the Cleveland and Columbus suburbs.

"If they just looked at the opinion polls overall, on balance, opinion goes the other way," Green said. "But if you look at the most rapidly growing urban areas, they are all connected to the global economy."