

Fact Check: Clinton, Obama and NAFTA

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WASHINGTON — Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama are paying a price for artful dodges on trade over the years, a burden on display in their debate Tuesday night.

Thanks to past equivocations, the Democratic presidential candidates have left themselves open to the criticisms and misrepresentations they are now using against each other as they scramble to dissociate themselves from a trade agreement they once praised — with qualifications.

Their dispute over trade flared anew in their debate in Cleveland. Clinton contended that she avoided taking a public position on the North American Free Trade Agreement when she was first lady, and became a critic of it when she ran as a candidate in her own right — in her 2000 Senate campaign.

In fact, she praised NAFTA while she was first lady and helped her husband lobby for its ratification. And she continued to praise it as a senator, while becoming more explicit in calling for improvements and citing its shortcomings.

Obama acknowledged in the debate that in his 2004 Illinois Senate campaign, he said — as he put it now — "NAFTA and other trade deals can be beneficial to the United States." His comments, as reported in 2004, were that NAFTA had brought enormous benefits to his state, but that trade deals needed to be made better for workers.

The root of their ambivalence is their shared belief in "free and fair trade," which, on the surface, almost anyone can subscribe to.

The problem is that "fair" trade means restrictions on "free" trade, a gloss-over that allows politicians to have it both ways when saying where they stand on NAFTA — the North American Free Trade Agreement — and similar deals.

In picking apart the other's this-but-that position, they are seizing on the "this," and ignoring the "that," in the interest of winning voters in the primary next week in Ohio, where the trade deal is blamed for lost jobs.

The dustup spilled into the streets Tuesday when dozens of protesters who oppose free trade gathered outside Clinton's office in New York City. Several apparently shackled themselves to a front door of the building before police came.

THE SPIN:

Obama on his position: "I don't think NAFTA has been good for Americans, and I never have."

Obama on her position: "She was saying great things about NAFTA until she started running for president."

Obama campaign mailer in Ohio: "Hillary Clinton believed NAFTA was a 'boon' to our economy," and "Only Barack Obama consistently opposed NAFTA."

THE FACTS:

Obama has been consistently ambivalent.

In his 2004 Senate campaign, he said the U.S. should pursue more deals such as NAFTA, and argued more broadly that his opponent's call for tariffs would spark a trade war. AP reported then that Obama had spoken of enormous benefits having accrued to his state from NAFTA, while adding that he also called for more aggressive trade protections for U.S. workers.

"We need free trade but also fair trade," he said, taking the dodge.

Obama is correct that Clinton has praised NAFTA in various ways, but he leaves out the qualifications she's expressed along the way.

And she did not say NAFTA was a "boon," as the mailer states on its ominous cover, depicting a locked factory gate. "Boon" was a newspaper's characterization of her position, which is reprinted inside the mailer.

THE SPIN:

Clinton in the debate: "You know, I have been a critic of NAFTA from the very beginning. I didn't have a public position on it because I was part of the (Clinton) administration. But when I started running for the Senate, I have been a critic."

Clinton on the trade deal's history: NAFTA was "negotiated under President George H.W. Bush and it was passed during my husband's presidency. But I was always uncomfortable about certain aspects of it, and I have always made that clear."

Clinton mailer on Obama's position: "Ohio needs to know the truth about Obama's position on Protecting American Workers and NAFTA."

THE FACTS:

Her implication that NAFTA was simply a spillover from the first President Bush and passively made law under President Clinton ignores the fierce lobbying Bill Clinton engaged in to get the deal ratified by Congress. Hillary Clinton helped him in that effort.

President Clinton used his faith in free trade as a core issue to distinguish himself from Democratic orthodoxy and establish a "third way" between politics of the left and right.

Hillary Clinton counted NAFTA among her husband's leading accomplishments, despite her publicly expressed misgivings about parts of it.

In 1996, when the pact was three years old, she said the trade deal with Mexico and Canada was giving U.S. workers a chance to compete. "That's what a free and fair trade agreement like NAFTA is all about," she said. "I think NAFTA is proving its worth."

In a speech to the centrist Democratic Leadership Council in 2002, the New York senator said this of her husband's record:

"The economic recovery plan stands first and foremost as a testament to both good ideas and political courage. National service. The Brady bill. Family leave. NAFTA. Investment in science and technology. New markets....

"All of these came out of some very fundamental ideas about what would work. The results speak for themselves."

The Clinton mailer accurately quoted news stories from 2004 describing Obama's call for more NAFTA-like agreements and his belief that the deal has brought benefits to his state. But the mailer was strikingly selective, leaving out qualifications he emphasized at the time, and were closely linked in the news stories.

In one such example, he said: "The problem in a lot of our trade agreements is that the administration tends to negotiate on behalf of multinational companies instead of workers and communities."