

Clinton Works to Hold Ohio Lead as Obama Attacks on Trade, Jobs

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Ohio was supposed to be Hillary Clinton's firewall. She's backed by the governor, former Senator John Glenn and the state's first black elected congresswoman. And her focus on health care and jobs is tailor-made for the economically distressed Rust Belt state.

Instead, Senator Barack Obama has cut into all her strengths heading into the March 4 Democratic primary, as he did in the last 11 presidential-nominating contests, and Clinton is fighting for her political life.

"If Hillary Clinton loses Ohio, her campaign is effectively over," said Chris Duncan, chairman of the political science department at the University of Dayton.

Clinton, 60, a New York senator, has been forced to shore up her blue-collar base as Obama promises to create jobs and criticizes U.S. trade policy, including, by association, one of its chief architects, former President Bill Clinton.

His message is resonating in Ohio, which has lost almost a quarter of its factory jobs since 2000. Obama, 46, has growing union support -- he was endorsed this week by the 1.4 million-member International Brotherhood of Teamsters -- and is touring industrial parts of the state.

Clinton can count on her own support from labor unions, as well as from Catholics and Democratic officeholders, such as Governor Ted Strickland and Representative Stephanie Tubbs Jones, one of the state's most influential black officials.

Microcosm of U.S.

Still, Ohio's diversity presents a challenge. The state is home to dozens of college campuses, where Obama, an Illinois senator who has won other Midwestern primaries such as Wisconsin and Missouri, does well. Racially and economically, it's a microcosm of the U.S. Its primary allows any voter to cast a ballot, which plays to Obama's efforts to reach across party lines.

And Ohio's eight major cities, each with its own culture and media market, make it impossible for candidates to reach a critical mass of voters in just one or two stops, which plays to Obama's more effective ground organization.

“You don't campaign the same way in conservative Cincinnati as you do in Columbus,” said [John Green](#), a political science professor at the University of Akron. “Candidates have to work really hard in Ohio.”

Both candidates are talking a lot about work in Ohio, where manufacturing employment has declined 23 percent, or by 235,900 factory jobs, since December 2000. Only California and Michigan have lost more. In the third quarter of 2007, 3.72 percent of homes in Ohio were in foreclosure, more than twice the 1.69 percent nationwide.

‘Demolished’

“The state has just been demolished,” said Steven Capozzola, a spokesman for the [Alliance for American Manufacturing](#), a partnership of manufacturers and the United Steelworkers union.

It's an environment that has some voters taking a second look at Obama.

“Hillary is too tied to the old political machinery,” said David Breithaupt, 48, an editor at a Columbus sports newspaper. “Obama might have a better chance of initiating some change.”

On Feb. 18, Obama met with workers at a titanium plant, [RTI International Metals Inc.](#), in Niles to talk trade.

“In the last year alone, 93 plants have closed in this state,” he said. “And yet, year after year, politicians in Washington sign trade agreements that are riddled with perks for big corporations but have absolutely no protections for American workers. It will not happen when I am president.”

Rewrite Trade Accords

Clinton and Obama both vow to rewrite U.S. trade accords to include labor and environmental safeguards. Clinton supported the North American Free Trade Agreement when her husband was pushing for its passage in 1993. She has since called the agreement a “mistake” and advocates a “time-out” Her evolution on the subject has given Obama an opening.

“I didn't just start criticizing unfair trade deals like Nafta and China because I started running for office,” he said.

Clinton is countering by promising “no more trade agreements unless they are smart, pro-American agreements.” She's also highlighting universal health care, foreclosure relief and job creation.

‘People Are Struggling’

“Too many people are struggling, working the day shift, the night shift, trying to get by without health care, just one paycheck away from losing their homes,” she said at a Feb. 19 speech in Youngstown. The election “is about picking a president who relies not just on words, but on work, hard work, to get America back to work.”

That message appeals to Paul Lucas, 36, a logistics analyst at a General Motors Corp. plant Clinton visited in Lordstown. Obama isn't ready, Lucas said. “He's trying to campaign for health-care reform. If anybody knows about health-care reform, it's her.”

Rhetoric aside, the candidates' records on trade are similar.

Both opposed the Central American Free Trade Agreement and say they're against deals with Colombia and South Korea. Both say they backed an accord with Peru, which passed Congress last year after Democrats changed its labor and environmental provisions, yet both were out of town for the vote.

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