

Primary makes Clinton, Obama talk trade

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If the 2008 Wisconsin Democratic primary contest is remembered for anything, it will be as the place where an unfocused debate on economics began to get serious about the issue of global trade.

In a state where there is a general sense that the North American Free Trade Agreement and the extension of permanent most-favored-nation trading status to China have done severe harm to Wisconsin workers, communities and industries, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton realized quickly that they were not going to get away with vague statements about globalization.

So when they hit Wisconsin, both candidates took a populist turn on the campaign.

How much so? Today's New York Times features an article from Wausau that begins, "Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama intensified their populist appeals on Monday, responding to widespread economic anxiety and pushing the Democratic Party further from the business-friendly posture once championed by Bill Clinton."

Central to that "business-friendly" posture was support for NAFTA and other free trade deals -- a stance that both the senator from Illinois and the senator from New York moved away from in Wisconsin.

Obama began his primary campaigning in the state a week ago tonight with a Madison speech that featured several references to the need to change this country's approach when it comes to trade negotiations. The next morning, at the behest of U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, Obama went to Feingold's hometown of Janesville to deliver a major address on economic policy at the General Motors plant there.

"When I am president, I will not sign another trade agreement unless it has protections for our environment and protections for American workers," he told the United Auto Workers union members. "And I'll pass the Patriot Employer Act that I've been fighting for ever since I ran for the Senate -- we will end the tax breaks for companies who ship our jobs overseas, and we will give those breaks to companies who create good jobs with decent wages right here in America."

Not to be outdone, Clinton told workers in De Pere that she would institute a "time-out" on all new trade agreements and institute a review of existing agreements with an eye toward addressing flaws that have saddled the United States with huge trade deficits. She, too, called for ending all tax incentives for companies that shutter U.S. factories and move jobs overseas.

"We have to take back every single tax break that companies get for exporting jobs out of Wisconsin," said Clinton, whose husband Bill not only led the fight for the NAFTA and China trade deals but also supported many tax breaks for businesses.

Before reaching Wisconsin, both Clinton and Obama had been far more cautious about breaking with the "new Democrat" mantra that free-trade benefits the U.S. Many critics of current trade policies, including key unions such as the United Steelworkers, had backed a third candidate, former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, who emerged as a far stronger critic of free-trade deals and corporate excesses.

After Edwards left the race, both Obama and Clinton sought the 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee's support and that of his supporters. In pursuing this backing, they muscled up some of their rhetoric on trade.

But things really changed when they got to Wisconsin, where factory towns such as Beloit, Janesville, Kenosha, Manitowoc and La Crosse have all seen the factories of major employers shuttered in recent years. And they recognized that after today's Wisconsin primary, they would be headed for Ohio for the March 4 primary in a state where trade issues are, if anything, a bigger deal.

As the Wisconsin campaign wound down, both Clinton and Obama provided the most detailed responses yet to questions about precisely where they stand on the federal government's approach to trade.

The questions came from Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition, a network of labor, farm and environmental groups that pressured the candidates to get specific about how they would change trade policies.

In response to the coalition's inquiries, the candidates renewed their opposition to the planned Colombia Free Trade Agreement, and expressed opposition to proposed Panama and South Korea agreements. Both Obama and Clinton also called for changes in how NAFTA has been implemented and indicated support for a review of how trade deals are negotiated and enacted.

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