

# Superdelegates Leverage Uncommitted Status for All Its Worth

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When Rep. Marcy Kaptur got an audience with New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton the week before last, the undecided superdelegate from Toledo grilled the former first lady about how she would regulate trade and create jobs to benefit districts like her own, an old industrial hub that has not fared well in the modern economy.

Like a voter suddenly thrust into a focus group led by the candidate, Kaptur took full advantage of Clinton's meeting with a group of trade-wary Democrats, many of whom remain undeclared, to drill past the platitudes of the television ads and set speeches of the presidential campaign..

Clinton won solid but far from perfect marks for her performance from Kaptur, who is anxious to hear what the Democratic frontrunner, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, has to say.

Kaptur said holding out on when it comes to her endorsement has had its advantages for lawmakers like herself who have an agenda to push and that the competitiveness of the Democratic nomination fight has given her the leverage to do so. "Had we not remained neutral, we would not have gotten a discussion," Kaptur said. "I don't think either one of them would meet with us if they were not that close."

According to one list, there are 21 House Democrats in the group of lawmakers that want to force the candidates to take detailed stands on a series of trade issues such as how they would renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, whether they would address trade disparities the lawmakers attribute to the use of value-added taxes in foreign countries, how they would use the tax code to encourage American businesses to keep facilities in the United States, and what steps they would take to create jobs by investing in domestic infrastructure needs.

The group still includes at least 12 undecided lawmakers: Kaptur, Reps Michael H. Michaud of Maine, Bart Stupak of Michigan (who will only be a superdelegate if the Democratic Party seats a delegation from his home state), Joe Donnelly and Peter J. Visclosky of Indiana, Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon, Jason Altmire and Christopher Carney of Pennsylvania, John Sarbanes of Maryland, Ciro D. Rodriguez of Texas, Gene Taylor of Mississippi and Heath Shuler of North Carolina.

Since Clinton's meeting with the group, one member, Betty Sutton of Ohio, has endorsed her.

“I have had the opportunity to engage in significant discussions with Sen. Clinton about the concerns and hopes of the people I am so honored to represent,” Sutton said without mentioning the working group specifically. “She has demonstrated a keen understanding of the pressing issues, such as the need to create economic opportunity for working families right here in Northeast Ohio.”

Kaptur insists that she is still neutral, nearly six weeks after her district gave Clinton a narrow but hardly decisive edge. It is hard to tell whether the narrow Clinton victory was influenced by conservative radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh encouraging Republican listeners to use the “open” primary rules to cast ballots for Clinton as part of what he calls “Operation Chaos.”

For now, her position as a superdelegate and the collective leverage of her industrial-state colleagues are giving Kaptur a chance to pressure the Democratic rivals to address the needs of her constituents even after they have voted. She is looking forward to Obama’s session with the group.

“I’ll have more questions for him,” she said.

How he answers will be part of Kaptur’s decision-making process.

“That will have an influence on me,” she said.