# Presidential candidates focus on Ohio's economic woes, trade

Elizabeth Auster
Plain Dealer Bureau
February 26, 2008

Washington -- For months, John Colm wished the presidential candidates would confront a subject he worries about all the time: the impact of foreign trade on U.S. manufacturers and workers.

But Colm, president of a nonprofit group that's been trying for years to revive manufacturing in Greater Cleveland, got the sense the candidates weren't all that interested. Then, a few weeks ago, things abruptly changed. As soon as it became clear that Ohio would play a crucial role in the Democratic nomination battle between Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, Colm began hearing plenty about the tragic side of trade.

That pleases him. Still, Colm says, he wonders how aggressively either candidate would tackle the sorts of problems that infuriate Ohio manufacturers -- from Asian governments that rig their currencies to make their exports cheaper than U.S. goods, to companies abroad that violate U.S. patents, to customs agents at foreign ports who cite dubious rules to prevent U.S. goods from entering their markets.

"Voters need to be wary of battlefield conversions," he says. "Neither Obama nor Clinton talked much about trade until they came to Ohio."

If Obama and Clinton have yet to fully win over Ohioans who blame U.S. trade policy partly for Ohio's loss of about 235,000 manufacturing jobs since the 2000 election, it's not for lack of trying.

Both candidates have focused intensely on trade-related plant closings during their visits to the state, both have promised to insist on tougher terms in future trade deals, and both have swapped bitter charges about who has a longer history of criticizing the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The ferocity of their fighting masks a truth, however, that advisers to both campaigns acknowledge: When it comes to their actual positions on trade, there is little substantive difference between the two candidates. During the time both have been in the Senate, Obama and Clinton repeatedly have voted the same way on trade deals, and both have expressed the same concerns about pacts the Bush administration has negotiated with South Korea, Colombia and Panama.

Both Obama and Clinton have taken a nuanced approach to trade that sets them apart not only from Arizona Sen. John McCain, the likely GOP nominee who has been a consistent supporter of trade deals, but also from longtime Democratic trade critics such as Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown.

Unlike Brown, who advocates a sharp break from the past, both Obama and Clinton joined McCain in endorsing a recent trade deal with Peru that included stronger environmental and labor provisions than previous agreements had. They also joined McCain in voting for a trade pact with Oman in 2006 that Brown opposed.

Unlike McCain, however, both Clinton and Obama opposed a Central American pact in 2005.

The two Democrats' similarities extend beyond trade agreements. Both promise to crack down on China's currency practices and to eliminate tax policies that make it profitable for companies to create jobs overseas. Both support a major expansion of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program, which provides retraining to workers who lose jobs because of trade.

Neither has ruled out asking Congress, if elected, for permission to negotiate trade deals with other countries on a "fast-track" basis that would require a yes-or-no congressional vote without amendments - something fierce trade critics think no president should get.

When asked to point out differences with Obama, Clinton advisers point to several of her proposals that they say show the intensity of her commitment to ensuring that U.S. companies and workers will get more out of trade deals in the future.

Clinton has proposed that all U.S. trade deals be reviewed every five years to check whether they are performing as expected. She also has called for establishing a trade enforcement officer in the U.S. Trade Representative's office with double the enforcement staff that is available now to make sure foreign trade partners are playing by international rules. Clinton also has promised a "time-out" from new trade deals during the early months of her presidency so she can conduct a review of existing trade deals.

"Hillary has laid out three very aggressive steps, more aggressive than Sen. Obama," says Neera Tanden, Clinton's campaign policy director.

Obama's campaign points to legislation he has co-sponsored with Brown that would provide tax breaks to companies that keep jobs in America and compensate their workers well. Obama also has questioned Clinton's call for a time-out on trade deals, suggesting she is changing her tune on trade for political reasons.

"In the years after her husband signed NAFTA, Sen. Clinton would go around talking about how great it was and how many benefits it would bring," Obama said in Wisconsin. "Now that she's running for president, she says we need a time-out on trade. No one knows when this time-out will end - maybe after the election."

Both candidates have said they want to renegotiate NAFTA to ensure that U.S. workers don't suffer because of weaker labor and environmental standards in other countries. And they have accused each other of making positive comments about NAFTA in the past.

Given the few policy differences between the candidates, Karen Hansen of the Ohio Conference on Fair Trade, which opposes current U.S. trade policy, says the choice may come down to guesses about how Obama and Clinton would act if they're elected. Obama's shorter record on trade, she says, makes it hard to know what he would do.

"The thing with Obama is we just don't have the history with the votes," she says.

Her reservations about Clinton, Hansen says, revolve around her husband's championing of NAFTA and her sense that Clinton has more ties to corporations that benefit from trade deals.

"It was President Clinton that implemented NAFTA, and she has admitted there were problems that were not anticipated," Hansen says. "The electoral climate seems to be moving her, but that's a hard thing to quantify."

Gary Hufbauer, a senior fellow at the Institute for International Economics, says voters have reason to wonder whether candidates will do what they promise if they're elected. He notes that Clinton's husband didn't take a position on NAFTA when he ran for president in 1992 but became a "huge champion" of it the following year. And while Ronald Reagan spoke often about the virtues of expanded trade during his campaigns and his presidency, he took steps to protect several U.S. industries from foreign competition, Hufbauer says. "The policy was quite different from his rhetoric."

*To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:*
*eauster@plaind.com, 216-999-4212*