

NAFTA's triumph may be Clinton's downfall

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CLEVELAND -- It was a signature achievement of her husband's administration, an economic breakthrough, a political victory to celebrate. Now it may be a major liability in Sen. Hillary Clinton's bid to win the Ohio Democratic primary Tuesday, with its 141 convention delegates.

It's NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, which eliminated most tariffs among the U.S., Canada and Mexico. Passed in 1993, it was President Bill Clinton's principal contribution to globalization, but today it's a weapon Sen. Barack Obama is using here against the former president's wife to undercut her support among working class Democrats.

In the intelligence trade it's known as "blowback," the unforeseen and usually dire consequence of what seemed a good idea at the time. It has put Hillary Clinton on the defensive in this economically hard-hit state, produced one of the sharpest, angriest exchanges between the two rivals, and brought a sudden end to what seemed like improved relations in their Texas debate only a week ago.

It began with an Obama campaign flier over the weekend declaring that "ten years after NAFTA passed, Sen. Clinton said it was good for America." Within hours Clinton angrily declared she'd never said any such thing. "Shame on you, Barack Obama!" she fairly shouted, with Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland, a supporter, at her side nodding agreement.

Clinton has said she now favors a "time out" on trade deals. And this week she aired a television spot here pledging a "fight to change trade deals like NAFTA."

Not good enough, said Obama, who also favors a tougher line on all trade deals. He said Clinton can't take credit for "the good things" her husband's administration did and run from those that didn't pan out, such as NAFTA.

The issue produced a sharp exchange in last night's televised debate from Cleveland State University. Clinton claimed that she was always a skeptic about NAFTA. She remained silent during her husband's administration, she acknowledged, but insisted she has opposed the treaty regularly as a senator - something Obama vigorously disputed.

Asked if, as president, she would pull the United States out of the agreement, Clinton said: "We will opt out of NAFTA unless we renegotiate it . . . on terms that will benefit all of America."

Obama said he agreed with that. "I think Senator Clinton has shifted positions on this," he said, "and I think that's a good thing."

Until now trade generally has been a low-profile issue in the long Democratic campaign march through 24 states. But Ohio has a special beef with U.S. trade policy, especially NAFTA, which union activists and many Democrats blame for the state's steep manufacturing decline as factories moved to Mexico and elsewhere.

Only Michigan has suffered a greater loss of manufacturing jobs than the 265,000 (23.7 percent) Ohio has seen vanish the last seven years, mostly as a result of corporate outsourcing in search of cheaper labor and even complete plant closings. It's the worst jobs loss in Ohio "since the end of the Great Depression," according to the American Manufacturing Trade Action Coalition, a manufacturers association.

"Trade is an issue here," said Amy Hanauer, executive director of Policy Matters Ohio, an issue think tank, "and NAFTA is a proxy for trade. It may hurt Hillary Clinton."

Very little of Ohio has escaped the exodus of the heavy industry jobs that made the upper Midwest America's industrial heartland. Nine of the state's 13 largest metropolitan areas have lost jobs in huge numbers - Cleveland, Dayton, Canton, Lima, Toledo, Steubenville, Youngstown, Mansfield and Springfield. Big employers such as American Standard and Hoover have shut their doors completely here in recent months to move elsewhere.

The political consequences were made abundantly clear two years ago when Democratic Rep. Sherrod Brown unseated Republican Sen. Mike Dewine handily, chiefly by denouncing U.S. trade policy and, by implication, Bill Clinton's prized NAFTA initiative.

Weariness with the Iraq war also played a role in Brown's upset victory, but it was the economy - jobs and NAFTA - that emerged as the top issue. With recession signs growing, it's potentially an even greater issue this year.

What's at stake as the Democratic candidates argue about trade are the votes of one of Hillary Clinton's prime constituencies - those earning \$50,000 or less. Most such workers here are white, with high school educations or less, and were assumed months ago to make up the core of Clinton's base here.

Michigan, Ohio's Midwest industrial big brother, was to provide the first test of blue-collar loyalty to Clinton, but since she was the only major candidate on the Michigan Democratic primary ballot, Ohio now will provide that test.

Clinton's lead in public opinion polls here, which one poll put at 21 percentage points last month, has shrunk to 10 points or less in the latest surveys. It's unclear what role NAFTA may have played in that slide, but one leading Democrat here, who declined to be quoted by name because his boss is still uncommitted, sees it as critical.

"If Barack Obama wins Ohio," he said, "it will be blowback from NAFTA."