

DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY

Anything in common?

Obama, Clinton and Pennsylvania blue-collar voters.

By [Ken Herman](#)

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COATESVILLE, Pa. — Here's the choice for working-class voters who could decide next Tuesday's Democratic presidential primary in Pennsylvania: an Illinois senator who graduated from Harvard Law School and is on the political fast track, or a New York senator who graduated from Yale Law School, married a man who became president and shares in the \$109 million they have made since he left the White House.

Democrats like Keith Gargus, an out-of-work furniture salesman in Coatesville — a city struggling to make the transition from steel town to anything else — say they don't see much of a working-class hero in either candidate.

Obama is trying to stem criticism following his comment that some small-town voters are bitter about their economic circumstances and "cling to guns and religion" as a result.

Gargus is backing Obama, a candidate whose more humble beginnings qualify him as more working class than Clinton, he said.

"This is an ex-first lady — this is an ex-first lady of a governor — and a senator, an Ivy League lawyer," he said. "This is a person of privilege that is worth \$100 million and disconnected from working-class people. I'd like to have the change that falls out of her sofa."

Folks like Gargus have it wrong, say folks like Earl Duncan and Mark Semenko, both of whom back Clinton.

"She is for all Americans, regardless of whatever race or whatever you are," said Duncan, a 76-year-old retired railroad worker and Korean War vet who questions Obama's commitment to America.

"He went to a church for 20 years where the preacher was anti-American and a racist," Duncan said, referring to the now-famous comments by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Duncan said he would vote for Republican John McCain over Obama.

About a quarter of Pennsylvanians are in blue-collar jobs (including a declining number of factory workers and a rising number of service workers) and their impact on the Democratic primary could exceed that level.

The numbers mean the lunch-bucket vote remains crucial in the state that Barack Obama hopes to make Hillary Clinton's last stand.

"In Pennsylvania, it's always important, and in a Democratic primary that importance is magnified," Chris Borick, director of Muhlenberg College's Institute of Public Opinion, said of the blue-collar vote. "And in this particular primary in the Democratic Party it's an incredibly important constituency."

How important? Nobody can win it without carrying the blue-collar vote, according to Borick.

Clinton and Obama will work to appeal to that demographic in tonight's Philadelphia debate, a one-on-one that comes amid campaign-trail rhetoric about which candidate is more attuned to the challenges of working-class America.

Voter registration numbers released this week show that Democratic strength has increased. The voter rolls now include 4.2 million Democrats, a half-million more than in April 2004 and 300,000 more than a year ago. Republican registration is at 3.2 million, the same as in November 2007 and April 2004.

"There are significant numbers of Democrats in the state who are blue-collar and who are up for grabs," said University of Pennsylvania political scientist Donald Kettl, "and Obama is trying to steal them away from Clinton."

Semenko, a 55-year-old architect from West Chester, said Clinton has working-class bona fides, as well as a wealth of experience.

"The last time I voted for somebody with no experience was George W. Bush," Semenko said. "And I only voted for him once. It's got to be someone with experience. That's why I'm for Hillary."

The Obama style — something that inspires supporters — is a major turn-off for Semenko.

"I've never liked from day one the way he speaks to people. It's almost this preacher sort of style that I find demeaning. It's almost looking down at me," he said, praising Clinton's approach as "more businesslike."

Semenko said he'd back McCain over Obama.

But Obama backer Gargus said he buys into the Illinois senator's change message. Something very basic, Gargus said, has to change.

"There used to be a job for everybody in this town. ... Now there are some jobs (at the steel mill) and they are good jobs," he said. "But there is no rush hour when they get out of work."

Coatesville resident Dave Carr, who dropped by to see former President Bill Clinton campaign for his wife Tuesday, is shopping for a November candidate. As a registered Republican, Carr can't vote in the Democratic primary. But he said he is considering voting for a Democratic presidential candidate — something he's never done — in November.

Carr, a former home builder, said he has been hit hard by the recent downturn in the economy, and said he has been forced to take a job with a local nonprofit organization.

Carr said he was initially attracted to the Obama style. But the attraction wore off about three weeks ago, he said.

"I'm not finding any substance," he said. "I just don't find him being genuine. ... With Hillary I find more specifics on what she is going to do."

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