

Majority of Americans Disapproves of US Government Approach to Trade

January 22, 2004

Wants More Efforts to Mitigate Effects on Workers, Environment

[Full Report](#)
[Questionnaire](#)

A new PIPA/Knowledge Networks poll finds that the majority of the American public is critical of US government trade policy and wants the government to make greater efforts to mitigate the effects of trade on workers at home and abroad, and on the environment. Presented three options, only 20% said “I support the growth of international trade in principle and I approve of the way the US is going about expanding international trade,” while 53% said “I support the growth of international trade in principle, but I am not satisfied with the way the US government is dealing with the effects of trade on American jobs, the poor in other countries and the environment.” Eighteen percent opposed the growth of trade.

Americans are likely to respond favorably to President Bush’s new push for job training. Sixty-three percent said that “government efforts to help retrain workers who have lost jobs due to international trade” have not been adequate. This is up from 57% from a poll on globalization that PIPA conducted in 1999.

Overall, the Bush administration’s handling of trade is a modest net negative for the president’s reelection prospects. Only 21% said that the president’s handling of international trade issues would increase the likelihood they would vote for him, while 37% said it decreased the likelihood.



Administration trade policymakers get fairly poor marks. Asked to rate the level of attention of administration trade policymakers to a number of priorities, majorities said

the administration gives too little attention to working Americans (77%), “people like you” (76%), and the impact of trade on the environment (62%). Perhaps most striking, 61% said the administration was paying too little attention to “the growth of the overall American economy,” up sharply from 36% in 1999.

Americans show concerns about the impact of trade on labor standards and the environment, with more than 9 in 10 favoring incorporating labor standards and environmental standards into trade agreements. If such moves slow down the growth of trade, more than 8 in 10 say that this is acceptable.

Comparing attitudes to PIPA’s 1999 study, Steven Kull, director of PIPA, comments: “Feelings about international trade have gone from lukewarm, to luker.” Asked to rate international trade on a scale of 0-10 the mean score has drifted from 5.5 to 5.3. Kull adds, “But at the same time, two-thirds say that in principle, they support the reciprocal lowering of trade barriers. It’s just that they feel more needs to be done to mitigate the effects on workers and the environment.”

A major stumbling block in trade negotiations has been farm subsidies, with developing countries refusing to open their markets any further as long as the US and other developing countries continue to give their farmers the advantage of subsidies and the US getting particular heat because of its recent \$125 billion bill increasing farm subsidies. Steven Kull comments, “While the public would oppose eliminating all farm subsidies, the scope of subsidies the public supports is so much narrower than is currently provided that, if the public’s preferences were followed, this would largely remove the current obstacle in trade negotiations.”

While 77% supported providing subsidies to small farms (under 500 acres), only 31% supported providing them to large farming businesses (over 500 acres). In fact, approximately 80% of US subsidies go to large farming businesses and while most of them get subsidies, this is true of only a minority of small farmers (Source: USDA).

Most Americans do not support the current policy of providing subsidies on a regular annual basis, rather than only in bad years. Only 34% (of the whole sample) favored giving small farmers regular annual subsidies, and just 9% favored giving them to large farming businesses.

Steven Kull comments, “Clearly, US policy on farm subsidies is far out of step with the preferences of the American public. The vast majority of US subsidies go to large farming businesses on a regular annual basis, while only 1 in 10 Americans approves of this.”

A striking finding is that the public in farm states was not significantly different in their attitudes about farm subsidies. The poll included an oversample of the 17 states that receive the largest amounts of farm subsidies, excluding the metropolitan areas of California, Illinois and Texas. In these states support for subsidies to small farmers was 81%, while just 31% favored subsidies to large farming businesses. Support for regular

annual subsidies to small farmers was 35%, while support for regular annual subsidies to large farming businesses was just 9%.

Just as in 1999 there are strong indications of a globalization of values in the American public— that their sphere of concern extends well beyond national boundaries. Seventy-four percent continue to believe that if Americans are using products made by workers in other countries this creates a moral imperative to ensure that they are not required to work in harsh or unsafe conditions. Agreement with arguments stressing the importance of promoting human rights abroad has increased, with a growing majority agreeing that human rights violations have an effect on the potential for terrorism.

The PIPA/KN poll was conducted with a nationwide sample of 1,896 respondents from December 19 to January 5. The margin of error was plus or minus 2.3%-4%, depending on whether the question was administered to the whole sample, two thirds, half, or one third of the sample.

The poll was fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel, which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided Internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp.

Funding for this research was provided by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Ford Foundation.