

Other Issues

Questions about how free trade might affect Canada's ability to retain its independence from the U.S. have attracted a lot of public attention. Nevertheless, the number of people who say they consider this issue to be paramount and who feel that our independence will be weakened has not at any time exceeded 30% and may have been declining slightly through December.

At the same time, many more Canadians have continued to express some concerns in this area. While large majorities have consistently said they feel free trade will end up making Canada and the U.S. more similar in many ways, considerably fewer have felt that Canada will lose some ability to make its own decisions.

While people are generally confident that our unique social programs will remain intact, a majority feel that the agreement may weaken Canada's ability to play an independent role in world affairs. The clear and consistent implication from the data in this area is that most Canadians share an abiding desire to have a "close, but not too close" relationship with the U.S. Among those who support the free trade deal, a certain number share some fears in this area, but have decided that either the dangers are not too great, or that the benefits outweigh the downsides.

A consistent, but shrinking majority, believe that Canada "gave away too much" in the free trade negotiations, and similar numbers have expressed the view that the United States will benefit more than will Canada. Much of this seemed predicated on a going-in assumption that either Americans were innately better bargainers than Canadians, or that the U.S. was bargaining from a position of greater strength. In essence, people are saying that what they expected to happen, did happen. It is worth noting that, just as is the case on matters related to Canadian independence, people can hold concerns in this area and continue to say they support the Agreement in overall terms. Clearly, the fundamental criterion is how the deal will affect Canada, not how it might affect the U.S.