

II. THE MEANING OF FREER TRADE

For Canadians, it is "freer trade if possible, but not necessarily free trade with the United States." But what does free trade represent to Canadians? Respondents were asked how they would characterize their overall understanding of how tariffs or non-tariff barriers such as government regulations work in international trade. The majority of Canadians (60%) think that they have a reasonably good understanding. This level has remained constant since the first wave of the study in April of 1986. Key regional and demographic variations persist. Confidence in understanding continues to be higher (71%) in the Metro Toronto area. There is a wide gender gap in self-styled levels of comprehension. Men are more likely to claim expertise (66%) than women (54%). Interestingly, age does not seem to correlate with insight into how tariff barriers operate. But education plays a key role. Those who have graduated from university are more likely to claim higher levels of understanding (+10) than their less educated counterparts. Income also rises with understanding; those reporting annual household incomes of \$50,000 or over are marked in their comparative confidence (+13). In sum, self-styled understanding of the barriers at stake in free trade does not appear to have grown with the greater exposure to the debate since April. It continues to be directly related to higher socio-economic indicators.

A. The Importance of Trade

Overall perceptions of the importance of trade to Canada's economic future remain high. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of Canadians consider trade to be very important to Canada -- a level unchanged since Wave I. There are interesting provincial variations in this perceived importance. In general, western provinces are more aware of the critical importance of trade to their national as well as personal well-being. Saskatchewan residents are more likely (+12 over the national average) to say that it is very important. In Quebec, on the other hand, just 53% of all residents consider trade to be key. Again, positive perceptions of the importance of international trade to Canada's economy rises with education.