

Free Trade

Summary of Public Opinion Trends

Overall Support/Opposition

Levels of overall support for the free trade initiative have been remarkably consistent for quite some time. Approximately half of the adult Canadian population say they support the Free Trade Agreement, while a slightly smaller proportion consistently say they oppose the deal. Precise levels of support and opposition vary considerably from province to province, with residents of Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec generally more supportive and residents of Ontario more opposed. Attitudes in Atlantic Canada tend to reflect the national averages.

Economic Considerations

More than half (between 53% and 62%) of those surveyed consistently reported feeling that the free trade initiative would result in economic benefits at a national, provincial and personal level. During the first two weeks after the trade agreement was reached, this perception dipped noticeably, but has recovered since that time.

Most people seem uncertain about specifically how these economic benefits will materialize: They are uncertain about whether there will be a net increase in the number of jobs, tend to doubt that incomes will be higher, but are broadly convinced that consumer prices will be lower. Most people doubt that many U.S. "branch plants" will close.

To the extent that they will make predictions about the effect of free trade on specific industries, people generally assume that the oil and gas, wood and paper products, and fish and fish products industries will benefit, while agriculture, wine, autos, and films, books and magazines will be adversely affected. It should be strongly noted that the degree of consensus on any of these is very slight: Most people acknowledge their unfamiliarity with the contents of the Agreement and appear to have absorbed little information about sector-specific effects.

A consistent majority of Canadians have said that they will be basing their view of free trade on economic criteria, rather than those relating to Canada's degree of independence from the United States. Among this group, two of three say they anticipate economic gains rather than losses for Canada.