



CENTER FOR NATIONAL POLICY

**AMERICA THE PROUD:
VOTERS' VIEWS ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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These focus groups were conducted during the late summer and early fall of 2000. Eight separate groups participated, all made up of registered, likely voters in four locations:

- Chicago, IL: Non-college white men; College white women
- Oakland, CA: College white men; Non-college white women
- Richmond, VA: College white men; African American women
- Cleveland, OH: White seniors; Non-college white men

Except for the seniors group (aged 60+), all respondents were aged 25-60, and all were swing voters or weak partisans. Discussions lasted 120-150 minutes and were led by trained focus group moderators.

As always with focus group research, the value of these findings is in understanding how people sort through these issues, the language they use, and the ideas and images that shape their views. However, focus group research is not designed to provide quantitative measurement of specific attitudes.

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OVERVIEW: PROUD OF AMERICA, UNCERTAIN ABOUT TRADE

A number of basic findings were consistent across all of the focus group discussions.

- Voters identify America as a winner and want it to continue to be a winner.
We're strong minded, strong people in general. We are strong willed. We don't give up easily. (Illinois man-page 8)
- Despite concerns about declining moral values and other social problems, American voters said they felt very proud of their country, and fortunate to be American.
The core emotion shared by almost all these likely voters about being an American was feeling "proud." They had a patriotic, emotional attachment to the country that remains strong in spite of all the flaws they saw. (Page 7)
- While attempting to define American identity was a struggle for many respondents, most groups focused on the same fundamental themes: freedom, opportunity, democracy, diversity, and strength. Each one of these concepts is important to Americans in defining who they are, and each one has relevance to economic and trade issues.
Our diversity is what makes us such a unique power because of knowing how to identify with so many different personalities and cultures. (California man-Page 7)
- Freedom and opportunity emerge as core American values for voters. Their views on trade are rooted in the belief that free markets and competition are good for America if the competition is fair and people play by the rules. Thus, they do not favor protectionism or subsidies, but trade that is both free and fair.
- The impact of international trade on individual workers, consumers or communities is, for the most part, obscure to most Americans today. How the global economy works, who benefits, and what the costs might be are not issues that voters think much about in their daily lives.
- When pressed, voters expressed perceptions of economic and trade issues that reveal a broad class divide. While all groups of voters in this study said they saw the U.S. economy as booming at the time, those at the upper end of the socio-economic scale revealed much more optimism about globalization and other long-term trends than did other participants. Non-college-educated voters said the global economy had been hurting many Americans and they were deeply concerned about their own and their children's economic future.
The people that are doing good now are the ones who have had disposable income the last three, four years and were able to invest in the stock market. The average guy that is living from paycheck to paycheck, he wasn't able to capitalize on any of that stock market. (Illinois man-page 10)

AMERICAN ATTITUDES ABOUT THE OVERALL DIRECTION OF THE COUNTRY

This report covers the findings from eight focus groups conducted in August and September 2000 on two distinct but related topics: Americans' conception of their own identity as Americans; and their views on foreign trade.

Mood in 2000

In a time of record prosperity by most standard measures, the mood of the voters was remarkably ambivalent and complex. While many voters were expressing satisfaction about the state of the economy and felt good about how things were going in their own lives, the optimists were outnumbered by those who felt frustrated, disappointed, or uneasy about the direction of the country as a whole.

The good feelings, for those who had them, were driven mainly by the economy and technology. In particular, voters cited the wide availability of jobs and the explosion of technologies such as the Internet creating all kinds of new opportunities.

The economy is pretty good. Everybody who is looking for a job, got a job so far. (Illinois man)

I think the whole technology revolution is exciting. (California man)

I'm feeling good about the economy. I feel I'm in a better position now than I was. The best position I've been financially than I have ever been in my life. (California man)

However, voters in most groups, while acknowledging the prosperity of the past several years, were also likely to express frustration or anxiety about the country's direction. Voters mentioned education, health care, and retirement security as major problems on which the country seemed to be making little progress. They also seemed deeply cynical about political leadership.

I don't understand why we have to take money from other funds to pay for Social Security and stuff like that. (Illinois man)

I work in healthcare so I experience all the ambivalence the country seems to be having. What kind of a healthcare system they want... But yet, the politicians are behind a lot of problems. (California man)

There [is not] as much honesty as I would like in what is going on. We're hearing what we want to hear, not what is really going to happen or what is realistically going to happen, what people can achieve and can be done. It's politics. (Illinois woman)

A lot of social issues that I see that are not being addressed properly in my opinion or swept under the rug. (Virginia man)

And, despite the good economic times that had predominated in recent years, many voters expressed economic anxieties and concerns about growing divisions lurking underneath the surface of prosperity.

I think there is a big discrepancy in what people make as far as salaries. I think the gap is getting wider. The common working man like my brother, he'll work 50 hours a week and he'll be lucky if he makes \$40K and then you've got some guy working downtown that has the life of Riley and he is knocking down six figures and it's frustrating. (Illinois man)

The economy can't keep going like this forever. The stock market can't keep going forever. I think that whoever becomes President next is going to be known for their recession. (California man)

The economy looks like it is doing really great but I think it is a facade. There are people that are doing really great and there are people not doing anything at all. There is a great deal of money and power and influence going out there but you have different levels of people here. (California woman)

Yet, while noticeable anxiety and cynicism appeared to be widespread, there was very little anger in the voices of Year 2000 voters. Even those who expressed the most worry about the future seemed uncertain as to whether anything could be done. Prosperity seemed to have taken the edge off of voters' worries, and most appeared to have settled into a somewhat concerned but otherwise complacent attitude toward public affairs and issues.

Enduring Values, Declining Values?

At the same time, many voters expressed deep concern about moral values and the consequences of family breakdown. There was a sense that even as our country had become more prosperous materially, the bonds of values, civility and morality were breaking down.

Our children are supposed to be the leaders of tomorrow, but yet the way the economy is they have no guidance from family members because the family members are too busy to deal with them and therefore the morals have gone down. (Virginia man)

Parents aren't taking enough responsibility for their children. (Ohio woman)

Nobody has respect anymore for people and nobody believes in any of the old values. (Illinois man)

Some older voters expressed concern that the upcoming generation does not share the values of community, hard work, and responsibility that they believe has made America strong.

I think the majority of Americans are hard working people and so they are for the middle class person more than the get rich quick type of person. Like these young kids that come along and say they are a millionaire overnight and things like that. (Illinois woman)

Yes, our economy is doing great on the surface now but look at the price we've paid for it. We have moms that are so darned busy they don't even have two hours to volunteer. We are all so focused on me, me, me and we're not worried about holding our families together and maintaining those relationships. We don't even talk to our neighbors. (Illinois man)

These kids go in and they want right away what it took us 25 or 30 years to attain. (Ohio woman)

Even in a time of "peace and prosperity," Americans clearly felt buffeted by economic and social changes they did not fully understand. Many appeared worried that enduring values were being neglected as we rushed into a chaotic and confusing new millennium. At the same time, most voters seemed optimistic that the nation's material comfort would continue to improve.

Defining American Identity

Being an American proved to be an important part of voters' sense of identity, but many seemed quite uncertain how to describe what that meant. Still, in the course of their conversations certain fundamental themes emerged repeatedly across all groups: freedom,

opportunity, democracy, diversity, and strength. Each one of these concepts appears to be important to Americans in defining who they are, and interestingly, each one has relevance in relation to their views on economic and trade issues.

The word **freedom** came up more than any other in discussing American identity. Freedom has many facets for these voters – including freedom of speech, economic freedom, and more broadly, the freedom to live as one chooses. Participants saw these freedoms as truly setting the United States apart from most other nations around the world.

If you are in another country sometimes you don't really get freedom. But here you are blessed because you can do what you want and live your life the way you want to, not the way they want you to. (California woman)

We have freedom of speech. (Illinois woman)

Being able to choose to do whatever in life that you want to do. Having choices. (Virginia woman)

You can move around the country without having to register with the police or the local police, and things like that. Do whatever you want. (Ohio man)

Participants were quick to describe America as a land of economic **opportunity**. While many were worried about their own ability to keep up with a rapidly changing economy, the belief that America offers unparalleled opportunities for people to pursue their goals remains strong. Indeed, the sense of opportunity was magnified by the high-tech boom, even among those who felt they themselves were being left out.

I think there are unlimited opportunities, if you look for them. You can find education if you need it and you can find different opportunities just to advance yourself. (Illinois woman)

You have an opportunity...if something interests you -- if you have some goal, even if it is a silly one, at least you have some latitude in terms of pursuing it. (California man)

I think America welcomes a sense of achievement. If you immigrated to this country, you and your children will be better off. The future generations of Americans are better off with each generation than the prior generation. (California woman)

These Americans also took great pride in the country's long tradition of **democracy**. The right to vote and to choose their leaders on Election Day was deeply cherished by the likely voters in these focus groups. Of course, these participants were representative of the approximately half of adults who do not vote and clearly were less entranced by the act of casting a ballot. Among voters, however, democracy and voting were seen as essential to their American identity.

[We] choose our leader, that is a right to vote. Not every country has the right to vote like the United States has. (Illinois man)

It means to be able to vote and to care for your country. To care what happens in your country. (California woman)

In a democracy you really get the government you deserve. (Illinois woman)

The **diversity** of the U.S. was also striking to these participants as they looked at America. As with freedom, opportunity and democracy, they mostly viewed diversity as something that contributes to our strength as a nation and our economic success. However, some worried that an increasingly diverse country was becoming more fragmented. Still, the continued influx of immigrants was seen as further evidence of the great freedom and opportunity available in the U.S.

All of the nationalities that have come to one place, and make it work. (Ohio woman)

We have basically all the cultures of the world in America. (California man)

We're an open society. We try to practice a policy of the country through the Constitution that all men are created equal, so we try to be open to diversity much more than most countries in the world. (California man)

I think the whole world tries to follow our lead and all that stuff and everything else. That is why everybody wants to come over here. (Illinois man)

The enormous **strength** of this country was another highly salient feature to participants. They viewed the United States as the world leader, both militarily and economically, and took comfort in that sense of strength.

I feel that one thing that defines us is the fact that we are the world's greatest power. I would not want to be anything but. (Ohio woman)

Military force. I know that they will protect me. (Illinois woman)

I just feel collectively we have accomplished a lot as a country. We're economically strong. We're able to defend our interests militarily if we need to. (California man)

We've got the upper hand on all that because we're the strongest country. Everybody comes to us. They are always looking for us. (Illinois man)

In particular, participants viewed the strength of America as rooted in the very qualities they described as essential to our identity: freedom, opportunity, democracy and diversity. They saw that political and economic freedom as essential factors contributing to the country's success.

I talk about anything I want. The freedom to have my opinion and to express my opinion. I think part of that expression is why we have so much wealth and power as a nation. It's because we're telling it like it is. (California woman)

Our diversity is what makes us such a unique power because of knowing how to identify with so many different personalities and cultures. (California man)

Proud to be a Winner

The core emotion shared by almost all these likely voters about being an American was feeling “proud.” They had a patriotic, emotional attachment to the country that remains strong in spite of all the flaws they saw.

Proud and also worried. (Ohio woman)

Proud and lucky. (Virginia man)

Proud and fortunate. (California man)

Proud and scared. (Virginia woman)

I grew up in this nation, feeling I have always what I wanted. Do what I want. And even though I'm not rich and I don't have everything I want but I'm in a place where you can make your own decisions, do what you want to do, if you want it bad enough you can do it here without too much stopping you. (Ohio man)

Many voters also described themselves as “lucky” or “fortunate” to be Americans, even those who were simultaneously frustrated or disgusted with the direction of the country. When discussing American identity, voters mentioned economic well-being and material goods far less frequently than values and ideals, but the material wealth of our country was clearly part of what made these Americans feel fortunate.

Lucky to be in an economically advanced country and not faced with insurmountable poverty. (California man)

To live comfortable, most of the people in this country at least have a roof over their head, and enough to eat. (Ohio woman)

The principals in all these groups generally identified America as a winner and want it to continue to be a winner. The core emotion shared by almost all these likely voters about being an American was feeling “proud.” They had a patriotic, emotional attachment to the country that remains strong in spite of all the flaws they saw.

[We're] just coming off the Olympics and I got into watching that... I am just glad that I've been born here. And proud on how we seem to lead the world in a lot of things. (Virginia man)

We live in a country that most other countries... look to because we are free. (Ohio woman)

We have the upper hand cause we are richer. (Virginia woman)

Even where we fall short as a nation, these Americans believe in striving to do better, and see that as part of our winning attitude as a nation.

We are all disgusted with things going on but we have a responsibility to keep trying, to try to live up to those ideals. (Illinois woman)

We're strong minded, strong people in general. We are strong willed. We don't give up easily. (Illinois man)

I said to be an American is to view life from the ideas to believe in the higher purpose of us all and to be optimistic that everything will be OK in the end. (Virginia woman)

THE AMERICAN ECONOMY AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Voters were divided over the state and the performance of the economy. While most who participated in this study acknowledged that the country had been experiencing a long-running economic boom, many citizens, particularly those with lower education levels and blue or pink-collar jobs, expressed the view that they had been left behind or left out. National polling data from the same period indicated that almost two thirds of non-college educated voters believed the economic boom had not reached them personally.

A Tide Lifting Some Boats

Voters who caught the boom – particularly those with higher education or high-tech skills – were feeling good about their own prospects and those of the nation. They mentioned statistics and anecdotal evidence to indicate that the economy was never better. While few were completely satisfied, their worries gravitated toward “side effects” of the economy such as the environment, traffic, and social values, rather than the fundamental ability to get by.

The economy is pretty solid. I worry about the side effects like somebody mentioned traffic and air pollution and ecology. (California man)

While we feel prosperous and my husband says we've never been better off, it is very frustrating to feel like you've got to spend so much time preparing for the future rather than enjoying what you have now. It is all locked up for 20 years down the road. (Illinois woman)

I feel fortunate, you know, I have most of what I want. (Virginia woman)

However, a significant portion of other participants felt that the economic boom had largely missed them. They expressed frustration at low-paying jobs and the high cost of health care, housing, or a college education. Many of them described what they saw as an ever-widening gulf between rich and poor, and expressed worry that they or their children would be “squeezed” out of the middle class.

There are jobs out there but they are not great jobs. (Illinois woman)

It is getting harder and it seems like there is more and more rich people. They just look at us like oh well, just throw us out. (California woman)

I think there are a lot of segments of society that this economy is not helping. I think the low end of the society is one -- the rich are getting so much richer; the poor are getting poorer and the middle class is shrinking. (Illinois woman)

No, [wages] are not keeping up. The economy now, the gas keeps going up, rent goes up, bills go up but your pay goes down. (Illinois man)

The rich are getting richer and everybody else has to keep working. They have to keep working harder and smarter or figuring out some other way of doing things to keep their standard of living. (Ohio man)

Some of the participants who were doing well themselves recognized and expressed sympathy for those left behind. However, they did not feel sure what could be done about it.

People that don't have the ability to go to college -- they drop out of high school, finish high school, have to take a minimum wage job or close to minimum wage. They are stuck especially if

they marry young, have a family. They've got huge rents. They can't afford to go to school even if they wanted to, so they are getting left behind. (California man)

The folks in the high tech industry are way out of scale compared to somebody who is getting a job at the Gap for the first time. A year ago that person would never get a job at Gap, so there is a little of that trickle down. I think everybody is benefiting a little bit. (California man)

Many participants, particularly women and non-college men, seemed quite anxious about the prospect of the next economic downturn. Still, they were neither energized nor angry, just mildly resentful not to be benefiting from the good times.

I think that the whole economy is an overblown, funny money economy. So it is like a big balloon that is ready to burst. (Illinois man)

We're in a great economic cycle now and that is not going to last. I think we've been forewarned many times this year with the stock market dropping at 13, 14 percent at times. (California woman)

The people that are doing good now are the ones who have had disposable income the last three, four years and were able to invest in the stock market. The average guy that is living from paycheck to paycheck, he wasn't able to capitalize on any of that stock market. (Illinois man)

Global Winners and Losers

The “global economy” is still something of an abstract concept for many Americans. Participants definitely believed we are living in a global economy, but not everyone is sure what that means. Again, there was a class divide. More educated and younger participants saw great opportunities, while older and less educated participants expressed more trepidation at how the global economy was affecting their communities.

Many of the participants, particularly those who are younger and college educated, believed they themselves and the country as a whole could adapt and take advantage of globalization and technological advances. They also believed globalization had led them to more choices and lower prices for all consumers.

It offers unlimited business opportunities. (Virginia woman)

It widens the market for a lot of things. I think it does make better prices on a lot of things. (Ohio man)

Broadening benefits to a lot of different countries, and I think it also opens up those countries to new ideas. (California man)

It helps us to expand our investments and our potential. It utilizes the resources of other countries. We can actually in effect raise our economy. (Virginia man)

The non-college and older participants also saw fundamental economic changes occurring, and were deeply worried about their own place in the economy and the world. They saw globalization primarily benefiting a small elite, while working people were losing jobs or had their wages cut by global competition.

[I see] jobs lost, pay reduced, standard of living going down. (Ohio man)

Businesses are going out of business here plus the people down there are getting a dollar a day for doing the work.... It is unbelievable. (Illinois woman)

The lack of resources to participate in it. It's going to take resources to participate in a global economy. (Virginia woman)

What those big investors, people who run those companies want to have happen is what is going to happen because they are giving the money. (Illinois woman)

Many of the focus group participants said that people who work in “old” industries in the U.S. such as manufacturing are suffering in the global economy. Participants in the industrial Midwest groups were particularly concerned about this, while many other participants believed it would be inevitable that these industries would be left behind or shifted to less developed countries.

All the big automakers go into one of their plants and look in their shipping docks.... All the boxes are coming from Mexico and Venezuela. They're all coming from cheap labor. (Ohio man)

It is taking away from us. If they make a good product and we don't make a good product, they are going to buy their good product from another country and throw ours out the window and that could mean jobs. (Illinois man)

That makes less jobs for us so eventually our economy is going to go down because we are going to have a lack of those jobs. (Virginia woman)

The economy has gotten so complicated and the requirements for getting good jobs are so advanced that a lot of people won't be able to function as well in this economy. There are no longer good decent jobs for people who lack a lot of education and skill. (California man)

Participants were also concerned about the impact of the global economy on human rights and the environment. They noted the existence of sweatshops and slave labor in certain countries, and were worried about poor environmental standards.

Impact on the environment as far as stripping away resources to make a fast dollar and not thinking of consequences. (Illinois woman)

It's great to be able to get shoes for half the price but also there is a risk from the environment to human rights violations. (California man)

There's more opportunity for countries be it China or India or whatever to take advantage of their population and have a lot of the sweatshops and that type of thing. (Virginia man)

ATTITUDES TOWARD TRADE

The impact of foreign trade on individual workers, companies and communities in the U.S. remained somewhat obscure to many voters. Since they had not thought much about how foreign trade works, who benefits, or what the costs might be, many voters did not have strong feelings one way or the other. When voters were invited to talk about trade, they tended to discuss their impact on the country as a whole more easily than they could identify impacts directly on themselves.

The Impact of Trade

Most participants had positive associations with the term “trade” and believed that foreign trade was, on balance, good for business and the economy. More upscale participants - particularly college educated men – tended to believe that they personally benefited from lower consumer prices as a result of trade.

It creates jobs. We still need people on this end shipping the stuff, receiving it, putting it in the stores. It gives you better prices. If you don't want to buy something from China, don't buy it. (Illinois man)

I think with trade we are choosing to trade because that is opportunity. That is good. (California man)

It's good for us because it allows us like we were discussing earlier it allows us the opportunity of choice. If we can get just as good of a product from this country as is made here then general economics shows that you are going to go with the lesser money. (Virginia man)

The sense of competition to bring your company up to standard would [cause] you to get better-educated workers, get a better product, look for better quality in materials used. It might have a temporary effect but I think sometimes foreign trade can prompt you or give you that nudge to improve yourself and look for better ways of doing. (Illinois woman)

Female and non-college educated participants were more likely to think foreign countries and/or big business were the main beneficiaries of trade. Although most participants believed America needed to continue trading, many were ambivalent about the impact on other Americans.

I think that we buy more junk than we sell to other people. It's all junk. (Illinois man)

It's not good for a lot of U.S. workers but it does mean we can get very inexpensive clothing. (Illinois woman)

The winners are the people, like she was saying, the technology and the money and what's going to be left behind is you're going to have a sub culture in that same country, because they're not going to have the skills. (Virginia woman)

I think it only reaches the people with money, because the people that don't have money that are working on these jobs are losing them because they are sending it over to another country. They are the losers. (Virginia woman)

The most immediate concerns about globalization and trade had to do with “jobs moving overseas” – that is, American or global companies moving operations to countries with cheaper labor.

The businesses are moving out of this country. I think they are moving for cheaper labor. (Illinois woman)

Ever since they signed the NAFTA agreement where they could go out and import and export things that the companies that are moving down to Mexico -- not just Mexico but a lot of the other countries, they are exploiting the people down there, paying them a dollar a day. And importing the stuff to us and the companies here don't care. (Illinois man)

We are losing those jobs here which means that people who could have been employed in those jobs for a reasonable amount of money could have been doing those jobs and not be standing in our welfare lines, or not be standing in our unemployment offices asking for help. Those jobs have gone to those countries for cheaper work. (California woman)

Many participants did not have a strong perception of the U.S. as an exporter, and were not sure what we exported other than Coca-Cola and McDonald's. Some participants mentioned that the U.S. was a leader in computers and high technology.

We don't trade as much. We bring in more than we put out. (Illinois woman)

With McDonald's and jeans and everything that they have to have that is American, obviously we are exporting it unless it is made over there anyway. It is still an American company. (Illinois woman)

You are going to see a McDonalds in every country. (Virginia man)

There is a lot of things that come from America like computers and stuff, chips from Intel, the biggest company in the world that is American. (California woman)

In general, participants believed that American workers and industries could compete and win in the global economy, but there were some doubts about specific industries. College-educated participants in particular believed that many manufacturing industries will inevitably shift to lower-wage countries and that we could afford to let them go. Non-college participants saw the loss as much more alarming, but felt relatively powerless to stop it.

I look at Apple, for example. The jobs that...we have...are the high paying jobs, the executives and the designers and so forth. The people actually putting and welding things to circuit boards are being done in Taiwan.... I don't think we're going to be able to compete [for manufacturing jobs]. (California man)

Jobs that were previously done here are no longer here, but I think the other side of it at least here there is other jobs that come in to replace them. (California man)

I think we should keep our jobs in the United States. Number one if you don't have a job what are you going to do? (Illinois man)

A lot of people cannot compete with other countries in terms of prices. There's no way that we could pay a person up here a dollar an hour to do the service. They just couldn't live. (Illinois woman)

Dealing with Unfair Trade

When asked specifically about trading practices, participants in all groups agreed that certain countries were trading unfairly with the U.S. – particularly Japan and China. They perceived import barriers (Japan) and exploited labor (China) to be the most common tools of unfair trade.

Other people's markets are closed to our industries, to our products to a greater extent than our markets are closed to other people's products. (Illinois woman)

I'd say Japan again because of their embargoes and restrictions. (California man)

There's a lot of subsidies out there. You can look at France and how they subsidize their wine, just for example their wine, they subsidize it, the government subsidizes it. (Virginia man)

I don't think we should be trading with any country that violates the human rights of its people. That is a personal opinion of mine, so I would definitely put China on the unfair policies list. (California woman)

I think a lot of those countries, they think Americans are so rich and they think that they can get away with everything bypass the restrictions and so forth, and we just accept everything that they send to us. (Virginia woman)

The participants definitely supported efforts by the U.S. to make foreign trade more fair to keep other countries from “taking advantage of us.” Their shared goal was not to reduce trade but to “level the playing field” so that U.S. industries could compete fairly.

I would say overall you would want to have free fair trade, so that would be the overall policy. (California man)

Just keeping the playing field level, it is about fairness. There are countries that it is pretty obvious that it is just one-sided. (California woman)

Balance trade, you know, we get 50 thousand, and you buy 50 thousand of ours. (Ohio woman)

I have faith that if the playing field is open then the business would do what they need to make sure their products get into other countries. (California man)

Seek the unilateral removal of tariffs on both sides. (Virginia man)

Participants did not want to protect or subsidize U.S. industries, but they were willing to consider retaliation – including tariffs and cutting off imports – against countries that trade unfairly.

Stop exchanging with them. (California man)

Well you don't trade with those countries that don't observe certain human rights. (Virginia man)

Put a limit on what we're going to take in. (Illinois man)

Imposing tariffs or limitations on imports and exports. (Virginia man)

We can say to a country, you know what? We're not trading with you... We are one of the largest nations in the world. If we cut off a country from selling to us, we could really cripple their economy and that is a major threat. I don't think we use it as often as we should. (California woman)

Rules for Trade and the WTO

Participants had only a vague sense, at best, of whether there were rules for global trade, how they were enforced, or who enforces them. When asked who or what controls the laws governing international trade, the range of answers included:

International trade unions. (Illinois woman)

The United Nations. (Illinois man)

The government's politicians but it is really controlled by big business. (California man)

Congress. (Virginia man)

International Monetary Fund. (Virginia man)

Would it be the Commerce Department? (Virginia woman)

I have no idea. (Ohio man)

The level of awareness of the World Trade Organization was very low. Some participants had heard of the term but knew little about what it did.

I don't see [the WTO] being any kind of power body. (California man)

I think they are representatives of the businesses and banks of each country. (California woman)

It's a group of countries that meet and discuss these trade organizations or these trade treaties. (Virginia man)

I don't know the specific rules that they are working on, but I think it's a meeting of the different countries, not all of them...it's a select group. (Ohio man)

Most participants liked the idea of having rules for global trade, but wanted to make sure the U.S. retained the right to act unilaterally if necessary.

Beyond tariffs and sanctions, the other direction we're headed in is agreements, negotiations. WTO is a start. At least it is a framework but it is definitely flawed. (California man)

If you're not abiding by what we agreed upon and somehow you're fined or you're restricted from exporting to favorite nations. (Ohio man)

I think each country enforces its own [rules]. (Virginia man)

I have a hard time feeling that we would allow ourselves to be treated unfairly because we are very much into making things better for ourselves. (Illinois woman)

Although most participants were vaguely aware of the WTO, they saw it as a distant international body with little impact on their daily lives. To the extent that the WTO had real power to make decisions about the future of U.S. industries, that power was not well understood by American voters.

Essential and Non-Essential Industries

The participants had definite ideas about which industries were the most important to keep in the United States. At the top of the list, they wanted our country to hold onto industries that were deemed essential to life or vital to national security. Military defense, agriculture, and energy were the sectors mentioned most often in this context.

[Defense because] we don't want to lose a war. (Illinois man)

I think for the security of the defense items...I feel that we have to do it here, to make it secure. (Ohio man)

[Agriculture because] you always have to feed people. (California woman)

I think infrastructure is the most important thing. It still goes back to the security of our country. (Virginia man)

When we are forced to trade to get the goods we need -- for example, with oil -- then it can be bad if we are relying on trade. (California man)

Industries that were perceived as providing large numbers of American jobs – particularly high-paying or high-skilled jobs – were also viewed as important to keep here. For example, autos were seen as important by some because they were thought to support many other industries, and therefore were a large portion of the overall U.S. economic base. The high-tech industry was viewed that way as well.

Mainly because our economy is run on that, automobiles. (Ohio man)

Not necessarily manufacturing jobs. More engineering, computer type jobs, that is really a priority. (California man)

I went with computer software because I'm a firm believer that eventually everything's going to be run by computers. (Ohio man)

[Computer software] because I think America has the smartest people or we have the intellectual capabilities to create better software here in America than other countries. (Illinois woman)

Participants were least protective of industries that were seen as non-essential or frivolous, such as entertainment. (Almost nobody seems to know that entertainment is one of our leading exports!) The participants also liked having lower prices on manufactured consumer goods such as clothing and appliances, many of them were content to have those products made in lower-wage countries. Also, the coal industry was disdained as old and dirty.

It is not important for my life and my well-being and my health for a movie to be there or not. (Virginia man)

The [entertainment] industry doesn't affect a great percentage of Americans anyway. (Illinois woman)

I think it's very difficult with wages in this country, to produce clothing here. (Ohio woman)

[Coal] is so diminished already, what is the point? Let's move on to other industries. (Illinois woman)