

International Publics Strongly Favor Labor and Environmental Standards in Trade Agreements

Overwhelming Majorities in Many Developing Countries and the United States Support Protections

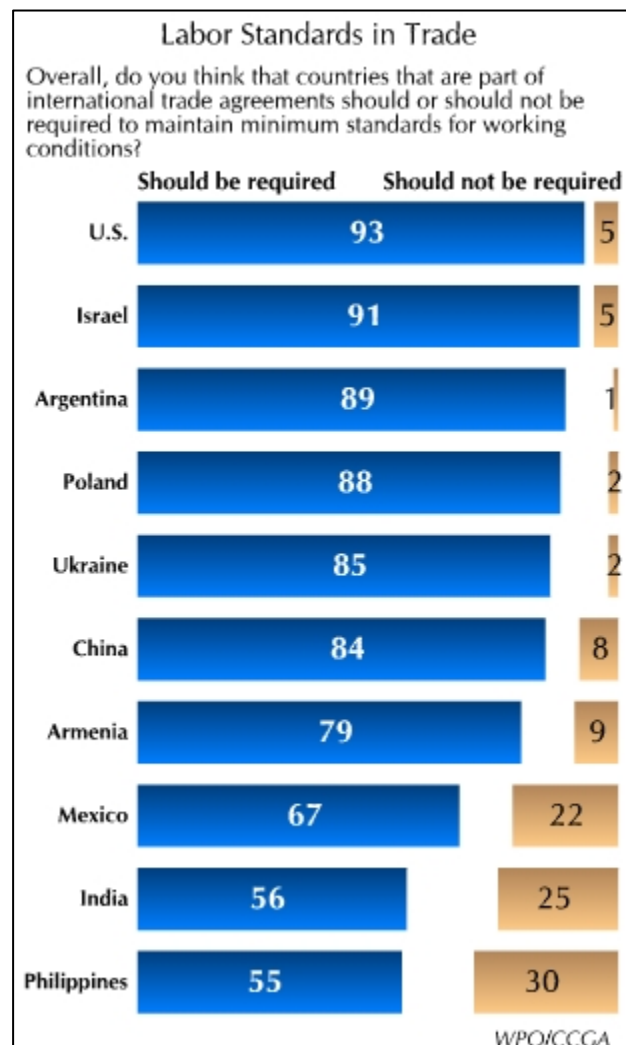
Strong majorities in developing nations around the world support requiring countries that sign trade agreements to meet minimum labor and environmental standards, a multinational poll finds. Nine in 10 Americans also support such protections.

The leaders of less developed nations have generally opposed including language mandating minimum standards for working conditions and environmental protections in trade deals, arguing that such rules are protectionist and would undermine their ability to compete in major markets such as Europe and the United States.

Nonetheless, majorities in four developing countries in Asia—China, India, Thailand and the Philippines—and two middle income countries in Latin America—Argentina and Mexico—agree that trade agreements should require governments to maintain “minimum standards” for working conditions or for the protection of the environment.

Large majorities in three eastern European countries—Poland, Armenia and Ukraine—also favor such protections as do an overwhelming majority of Israelis.

“It has often been assumed that when leaders of developing countries argue against including labor or environmental standards in trade agreements they represent the wishes of their people,” said Steven Kull, editor of WorldPublicOpinion.org. “However, it appears that these publics



would like to see the international community put pressure on their governments to raise their standards.”

These findings are part of multinational study by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs and WorldPublicOpinion.org, in cooperation with polling organizations around the world. The larger survey includes 17 countries—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Russia, Thailand, Ukraine, Poland, Iran, Mexico, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, Argentina, Peru, Israel, Armenia—and the Palestinian territories.

This is the second in a series of reports based on the survey analyzing international attitudes on key international issues. Not all questions were asked in all countries.

Developing Countries

The high level of support for the inclusion of labor and environmental standards within less developed countries in Asia and Latin America is especially surprising.

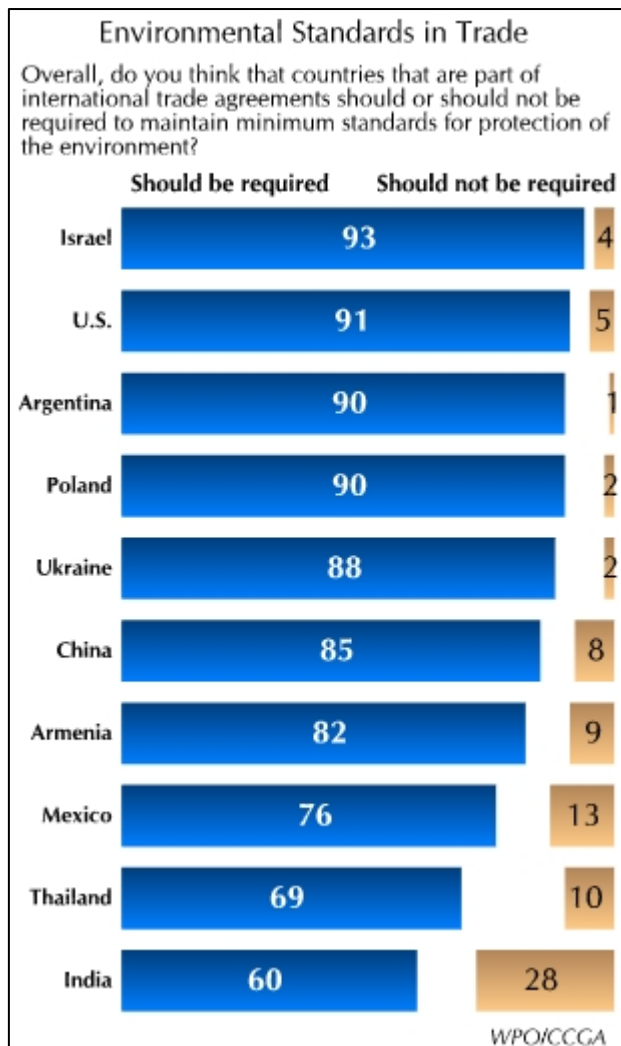
The Chinese favor labor standards by a margin of 84 percent to 8 percent and environmental protections by 85 percent to 8 percent.

The Indian public—whose government has been among those most opposed to linking trade with labor and environmental issues—favors labor standards by smaller but still substantial margins. Indians support minimum labor standards by 56 percent to 25 percent and environmental protections by 60 percent to 28 percent.

Seven in 10 Thais (69%) say that environmental standards should be included in trade agreements while only one in 10 are opposed (10%). Thais were not asked about labor standards.

A majority of Filipinos support labor standards. Fifty-five percent say trade pacts should include provisions to protect working conditions while 30 percent say they should not.

Two major Latin American countries also favor including both labor and



environmental standards in trade deals. Argentines overwhelmingly support both types of protections: 89 percent say minimum standards for working conditions should be required and 90 percent say minimum standards for protection of the environment should be mandatory.

Argentina is a member of Mercosur, a South American common market, whose leaders have in the past opposed including labor and environmental provisions in trade pacts.

The Mexican government has faced criticism by some U.S. labor leaders for failing to enforce labor and environmental rules required under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Nonetheless, the Mexican public favor is in favor of making such standards a part of trade deals by wide margins. Two-thirds (67%) of Mexicans say standards for working conditions should be included (22 percent are opposed) and three-quarters (76%) think environmental rules should be included (13 percent are opposed).

The United States

The U.S. public is nearly unanimous in its support of both labor and environmental standards. Ninety-three percent of Americans polled agree that “countries that are part of international trade agreements should be required to maintain minimum standards for working conditions.” Only 5 percent disagree. Support for environmental standards is equally overwhelming: 91 percent say such protections should be included in trade deals while only 5 percent say they should not.

The Bush administration has opposed the inclusion of such rules in the past, fearing that they would complicate trade negotiations and might force the United States to change some of its own labor laws.

“The American public is clearly concerned that trade agreements fail to protect either workers or the environment,” said Christopher Whitney, executive director for Studies at The Chicago Council on Global Affairs. “This strengthens the hand of those in Congress who share this apprehension, particularly as the White House increases its willingness to negotiate these issues with Congress in advance of the June expiration of the President’s Trade Promotion Authority.”

Israel and Eastern Europe

Israel is also overwhelmingly in favor of standards: 91 percent favor labor standards and 93 percent favor environmental protections.

In the formerly socialist economies of Eastern Europe, there is also strong support for including standards on working conditions and the environment. Nine in 10 Poles support both labor (88%) and environmental (90%) protections. Ukrainians are also enthusiastic—85 percent favor including labor standards and 88 percent favor environmental standards—as are Armenians—79 percent favor labor standards and 82 percent favor environmental standards.