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## **Narrow Majority Support Cafta But Most Know Nothing About It, Says Poll**

*by Mike Leffert*

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The most recent poll on the future of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) explodes the myth, said the newspaper La Nacion, that Costa Rica is divided on whether to ratify the treaty. According to the poll, 51% of respondents said CAFTA would be good or very good for the country; 25% said it would be bad or very bad.

The question they answered was, "In your opinion, what effect, in general, will the free-trade treaty have for Costa Rica?" At the personal level, 46% said the treaty would benefit them, while 29% said it would not. The survey was taken between Aug. 28 and Sept. 11. It was a door-to-door operation covering 1,207 respondents between the ages of 18 and 69. The margin of error was 2.8%. The poll sampled was 50.7% women and 49.3% men.

Socioeconomically, 62.2% were median, 32.6% low, and 5.2% high. The recent presidential election put Oscar Arias in office by a very narrow margin over challenger Otton Solis after a campaign in which the treaty figured prominently. Arias was pro-CAFTA, Solis against it unless it were renegotiated (see NotiCen, 2006-03-02). The poll showed that 58% of Arias voters favored the treaty, while Solis voters were 40% in favor and 35% against.

Across age categories, more than half of those under age 40 considered the pact good for them personally. Among those over 40, only 37% thought so.

On party lines, Movimiento Libertario (ML) members were most enthusiastic at 57%, and Arias' Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLN) were 53% positive. Solis' Partido Accion Ciudadana (PAC) voters gave CAFTA 41% approval on a personal level. La Nacion, in an editorial, contended that these results indicate there is no polarization regarding CAFTA in the country.

It suggested that "there are sufficient and objective reasons to question the representation" of the popular sectors in their insistence that the nation is split on the treaty. It takes issue with the unions speaking in the name of civil society on the matter. "It should prove paradoxical or strange for these leaders or groups that, despite the vehement and abundant campaign against the free-trade agreement, the people have not endorsed them."

But, after taking the popular sectors to task, the editorial begins to hedge, acknowledging that, among those with small and medium-sized businesses and those in the agricultural sector that serves the internal market, there is serious doubt. The paper urges the government to help these sectors survive by providing programs for them, and it assures readers that the government is doing that with a "complementary agenda." "In other words," says the editorial, "there is no reason whatsoever for the antipatriotic obstruction, for the calls to violence, for the threats and the

ideological rhetoric, the sophisms, the falsifications, and the censurable manipulation of students. There are sufficient reasons to understand, in good faith, what the people in general observe with common sense and even with hope. There is no reason at all to attack and obstruct a trade agreement that so many countries aspire to, when good judgment and responsibility urges us to achieve the structural reforms that our country has demanded and needed for a long time."

### *Approving without knowing or understanding*

However, patriotic exhortation aside, there may be some reasons to attack the agreement, and La Nacion seemed to know that when, in the same edition in which the survey article appeared, a separate article acknowledged that the poll also revealed that "the degree of knowledge about the free-trade agreement with the United States is very low."

The separate article then admitted, "According to the most recent poll of Unimer for La Nacion, 54 of every 100 people admit being 'little' or 'not at all' informed about the trade agreement signed Jan. 25, 2004." Only 24% said they were sufficiently or very well informed; 21% said "neither well nor little."

The poll also asked citizens what they know of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), the unilateral mechanism under which the country already enjoys trade advantages with the US, without having given up anything in return. Of the respondents, 58% had never heard of it and 41% had heard something about the CBI, which has brought the country preferential access to the US market for the great majority of its goods since 1984. Upon entering into CAFTA, CBI is nullified.

The poll also found, and the paper reported separately, that those over 40 years of age, those with only primary education, and those who live in rural areas of the country knew least about either CAFTA or the CBI. Respondents who considered themselves well informed tended to be between 18 and 24, of mid- or high-socioeconomic level, and reside in the greater metropolitan area of San Jose. The poll appeared as the ratification package was still in committee in the legislature.

The Comision de Asuntos Internacionales of the Asamblea Legislativa was in the final stages of hearing testimony from some 40 organizations wanting to be heard on the matter, both social and business groups. Many others had petitioned to be heard, but were denied.

Alberto Salom, deputy chief of delegation of the PAC, had tried to get them on the agenda. "There are between 15 and 20 social or business groups that asked to participate in the hearings, and they can't be discriminated against. We are pleading for them to be received in the committee." But committee president Janina Del Vecchio (ML) indicated that they had heard enough and the time had come to send the package to the floor.

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