

“Fairness in the Real World: Findings from US Public Opinion Research”
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Scholarly research has not explored in great depth the links between public opinion, human rights, and ethical consumption. The research I have conducted with colleagues at the University of Connecticut and Southern Connecticut State University explores what Americans understand about particular types of ethically produced goods – specifically, fair trade coffee and sweatshop-free clothing – and how much more they are willing to pay for such products. We have also analyzed whether or not there is a relationship between attitudes about human rights and ethically-motivated purchasing behavior. And we are now conducting experimental research to explore the influence of fair trade marketing on coffee consumption in a campus setting.

Our principal sources of data are three national public opinion surveys which we designed and fielded through the University of Connecticut Center for Survey Research & Analysis (CSRA). The surveys were conducted over a period of worsening economic conditions in 2006, 2008 and 2009.¹ We have already published an article analyzing the results of our 2006 pilot survey.² Given the space constraints of this short paper, I will not recapitulate here the overview of relevant literature on public opinion, human rights, and fair trade already included in that article. And our experimental work is too preliminary to report.

What this paper presents instead is a brief synthesis of several key findings across all three public opinion surveys, crafted in response to the following questions posed by the George Washington University conference organizers: 1) What does the public think about fair trade? 2) What do they think it means, and how important is it? 3) What does the public think about specific strategies – such as fair trade certification, social labels to delineate process standards, etc.?

Notably, all three of our surveys included a standard set of questions on basic human rights attitudes (i.e., right to freedom from torture; right to freedom of thought/expression; right to minimum standard of living); a set of questions on willingness to pay more for FT coffee and “sweatshop free” clothing; and questions on demographic characteristics (e.g., age, income, education, gender, race). The 2009 survey also included items on knowledge of and trust in a

¹ CSRA staff constructed national randomly selected telephone samples for each survey; responses for all three were weighted based on standard demographics from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey to be representative of the national adult population. The 2006 survey was conducted from 11/15/06 to 11/27/06 with a sample of 508 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 4.5%. The 2008 survey was conducted from 9/15/08 through 10/23/08 with a sample of 1,000 and a margin of error of +/- 3%. The 2009 survey was conducted from 2/29/09 through 6/26/09 with a sample of 1,006 and a margin of error of +/- 3%.

² Shareen Hertel, Lyle Scruggs, C. Patrick Heidkamp, “Human Rights and Public Opinion: From Attitudes to Action,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124, 3 (Fall 2009): 445-461.

range of other product labels.³ Both the 2008 and 2009 surveys include set of questions on knowledge of FT and perceptions of quality and price, along with similar questions on sweatshop-free products.

What do Americans think about fair trade? - General Overview

The following is a general overview of key findings based on data from all three surveys (i.e., 2006, 2008 and 2009):

- The American public doesn't fully understand what "fair trade" is – respondents have a more intuitive understanding of "sweatshop free" products.
- Upwards of 25% report seeing a Fair Trade (FT) label.
- Despite their lack of knowledge and despite the deepening economic crisis, well over half of all Americans report they are willing to pay more for FT coffee.
- Over half of all American believe the right to a "minimum standard of living" should always be guaranteed, at levels close civil & political rights.
- But that number has dropped as the recession has deepened.
- And not all those who believe in economic rights are willing to pay more for FT or sweat-free products.

What do Americans think "fair trade" means?

Across all three survey years, only about a quarter of our respondents had ever *seen* the FT label, as indicated above. In response to specific questions on the meaning of fair trade (included in our 2008 questionnaire), we find that more respondents (67%) think FT relates to "minimum wage" or working conditions "equal to the US" than a *guaranteed price floor*, the correct definition (only 33%)

Despite limited knowledge of the meaning of FT, consumers have strong opinions about its attributes. The majority in 2008 and 2009 believed FT products are more expensive; more than half did not believe FT products to be of better quality than non-FT ones.

How important is fair trade to American consumers?

- The FT label is less familiar to consumers than either the "Made in USA" or the "Sweatshop-Free" labels [2008 data].
- But consumer knowledge of the meaning of these more familiar labels is relatively low: just under half of all consumers knew what "sweatshop-free" means, and about half knew the meaning of a "Made in USA" label [2008 data].

³ Respondents in 2009 were asked about the following labels: Made in USA; Energy Star; Fair Trade; Certified humane raised and handled; Food Alliance Certified; Forest Stewardship Council; Green Seal; Free Range. This and all other full survey instruments are available upon request from the author.

Of those respondents who had actually *seen* various labels:

- Consumers trust “Energy Star” and “Made in USA” labels more than FT label [2009 data]
- Only about a third (35%) of consumers who had seen the FT label reported that they “look for” it when purchasing products.

Yet despite this relative lack of knowledge and trust, when asked specifically about willingness to pay more for FT coffee in all three surveys:

- Well over half of our respondents routinely answered that they would pay more.⁴

There is a relative consistency in *who is* willing to pay more for FT coffee, across all three surveys (2006, 2008, 2009):⁵

- women, liberals, people under 30
- those with less education in 2006, though their percentage drops in 2008

And there is relative consistency in *who is not* WTP more, with an interesting twist most recently:

- minorities, even controlling for income, are not willing to pay more [2006, 2008]
- BUT, in 2009, minorities show increasing WTP more

What do Americans think about specific strategies for promoting fair trade?

We have found what we call the “label paradox” – meaning consumers want but do not trust labels:

- 73% of consumers say government should require product labeling stating “how products are made” [2009 data]
- BUT 59% of the same consumers do not trust available information about how the product was made [2009 data]

We also find that while Americans believe more strongly in economic rights than is typically assumed, there is growing skepticism about them. And there is not an overly strong correlation in any of our surveys between belief in economic rights and actual WTP more.⁶

⁴ The actual amount more that respondents reported they would pay varied. In part, this may be an artifact of a survey design flaw: we varied the unit of purchase across the different surveys (i.e., we asked about WTP more *per pound* of coffee in 2006 and 2009 versus *per cup* in 2008). Only 2006 and 2009 data on price per pound are directly compared in the PowerPoint presentation accompanying this paper. Nevertheless, we found a general willingness to pay more, regardless of unit, over all three years.

⁵ Analysis based on odds ratios.

⁶ In 2006 and 2008, we found a statistically meaningful relationship between human rights attitudes regarding minimum standard of living and willingness to pay more for ethically produced goods. However, this is not as robust a relationship as we would have thought (logit analysis results available upon request).