Globalization continues to be a divisive subject among political activists, academics, business leaders, and policymakers. Some look at the rapid economic and political changes taking place around the world and see injustice. Others observe these same changes and see progress. On both sides of the debate, however, much of the discussion takes place among elites. What do average citizens around the world think about the powerful global forces transforming their societies? Survey research suggests that most people embrace the idea of a globalized world, albeit cautiously.

The main economic premises of globalization are generally accepted in regions throughout the world. People tend to believe their countries will benefit from trade, free enterprise, and investment by foreign companies. These views are especially common in many of the world’s poorest countries, including nations in sub-Saharan Africa. However, enthusiasm for economic globalization has waned considerably over the last few years in many wealthy nations, especially in Western Europe and the United States.

In nations both rich and poor, however, people worry about globalization’s downsides. Many are concerned about the disadvantaged in society who are left behind by the economic growth globalization can bring. Increasingly, they are alarmed by the negative effects of growth on the environment. Nearly everywhere, people worry about the potential loss of their own traditions and cultures in an interconnected world. Many are also troubled by the growing flow of immigrants across national borders.

So global publics do not fit neatly into either anti- or pro-globalization boxes. They largely reject the critiques of the strident anti-globalization protestors who have garnered considerable international media attention in recent years with their colorful—and sometimes violent—protests at international conclaves in Seattle, Prague, Davos, and elsewhere. At the same time, average citizens are more apprehensive about globalization than are the business and political elites who are often its greatest champions.

Support for Economic Globalization

In countries throughout the world, there is broad support for key economic features of globalization. The 47-country 2007 Pew Global Attitudes survey found strong support for international trade, multinational corporations, and free markets. However, the survey, conducted among representative national samples in 39 countries and disproportionately urban samples in 8 countries, also found important differences across various countries and regions. Perhaps the most notable among these are the increasing signs of economic anxiety among the wealthy nations of the West.

International trade is at the heart of globalization. The tremendous expansion of global trade over the last few decades has driven economic growth in many developing countries, while providing more diverse and less expensive products to consumers in the developed world. At the same time, it has created dramatic upheaval, as workers in poor countries have moved to cities in search of new jobs, while some in wealthier nations have lost jobs that have moved overseas. The 2007 Pew Global poll shows that, all things considered, people consistently endorse international trade. Sizeable majorities in all 47 countries said growing trade ties between countries are having a positive impact on their country. In 9 countries, at least 90 percent of those surveyed took this position. Favorable views are especially common in sub-Saharan Africa, the world’s poorest region. In all 10 African countries included in the survey, over 80 percent said trade was having a positive impact.

Large majorities also back trade in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, but the trend in these developed nations is clearly headed in a negative direction. For example, both Italy and France have seen double digit declines in support for trade since 2002. However, the ebbing of enthusiasm has been particularly dramatic in the United States, home to the world’s largest economy.
American opinions on trade stand out in two ways. First, among the 47 countries included on the survey, the percentage of people saying trade is a good thing was lowest in the United States. Second, among the 35 countries where trend data from 2002 is available, the largest decline in support for trade took place in the United States. In 2002, 78 percent of Americans said trade was good for their country; 5 years later, this number had fallen to 59 percent. The drop has been especially steep among Democrats, sliding from 77 percent to 53 percent.

In many ways, the pattern of public opinion on trade is reflected in public attitudes toward one of the key players in the global economy: multinational corporations. The 2007 Pew poll asked respondents whether they believe foreign companies are having a good or bad impact on their country, and in 41 of the 46 countries where this question was asked, majorities or pluralities said they are having a positive effect. However, since 2002, multinationals have become significantly less popular in the West, especially in Italy, Britain, and Germany.

As is the case with trade, foreign companies enjoy their greatest support in some of the world’s poorest nations. Ghanaians, Senegalese, Nigerians, and others from Africa are particularly likely to welcome multinationals. They are also popular among poorer nations in Asia and...
the Middle East, as well as in middle income countries such as Malaysia, Brazil, and Chile. There are, however, some low and middle income countries with more lukewarm views. For example, only 39 percent of Argentines said foreign companies are having a positive impact, though this is actually a 14 percentage point increase from the 2002 Pew survey, which was conducted just months after the country’s 2001 economic collapse.

Finally, the capitalist approach to economics also receives widespread support: in 39 of 47 countries, majorities agree that most people are better off under a free market system, even though some may be rich and others poor. Moreover, support for free markets is on the rise: in 17 of the 35 countries where trends are available, free markets were more popular in 2007 than in 2002. They were less popular in only five countries, and public opinion remained for the most part unchanged in 13 nations.

Support for free markets jumped significantly in several countries that have enjoyed strong growth in recent years, such as India (62 percent in 2002, 76 percent in 2007) and Poland (44 percent in 2002, 68 percent in 2007). Despite considerable discussion over the last few years about the rise of leftism and populism in Latin America, the Pew poll found that support for free markets had also increased since 2002 in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, and Peru. In Venezuela, home to controversial populist leader Hugo Chavez, 72 percent said people are generally better off under free markets, the highest percentage in the region. Even among supporters of Chavez, 68 percent endorsed free markets.

Inequality, the Environment, Loss of Tradition

While publics around the world generally approve of the key economic features of globalization, they also have important reservations about its downsides. For instance, even though they believe global trade and free markets can lead to economic growth, they realize this growth will not benefit everyone equally. As the 2007 Pew poll revealed, in many countries, there is a strong and growing concern about the gap between rich and poor. In countries as disparate as South Korea, Kenya, Indonesia, and Chile, large majorities named the growing gap between rich and poor as one of the top two dangers facing the world. In China, which has enjoyed remarkable economic growth in recent years, the divide between the rich and the poor was rated as one of the top two dangers by 51 percent.

The survey also revealed an overwhelming consensus that the state should be responsible for taking care of those left behind by globalization. In all 47 countries, majorities agreed that government should take care of the poorest in society who cannot help themselves, and in 30 countries, majorities say they completely agreed with this position. Although free markets are broadly embraced, few want a totally laissez-faire approach; instead, there is widespread agreement that government...
has a role to play.

While there are concerns that the growth associated with globalization is leaving some people behind, there are also worries about the damage growth is doing to the environment. Pew’s 2007 poll found a strong upsurge in environmental concerns: in Latin America, Europe, and Asia the number of people rating environmental problems as one of the top two dangers facing the world increased significantly. Even in the United States, where these issues tend to be less of a priority than in other economically advanced nations, concern for the environment has risen steeply. There was widespread concern over global warming, especially in Latin America, where large majorities consistently rated it a very serious problem, including 88 percent in Brazil, 78 percent in Venezuela, 75 percent in Chile, and 69 percent in Argentina. Europeans also expressed high levels of concern for the environment, particularly in Spain (70 percent) and France (68 percent).

Furthermore, people generally say they are willing to sacrifice economic growth to secure a clean environment. In 46 of the 47 countries surveyed by Pew in 2007, majorities agreed with the statement “Protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs.” In rich and poor nations alike, there is a consensus that damaging the environment is too high a price to pay for economic expansion.

People also worry that rapid changes stemming from globalization are decimating their local and national cultures. In 46 of 47 countries surveyed in 2007, majorities said their traditional way of life is being lost. At least half of that same number of countries want to have their traditional way of life protected against increasing foreign influence. These concerns are found in both economically advanced and developing countries. The lone exception to this robust pattern is Sweden: only 49 percent of Swedes said their traditions are being lost, and only 29 percent wanted to take steps to protect their traditional way of life.

The Anti-Globalization–Anti-Americanism Nexus

It is worth noting that each of these concerns—the rich/poor divide, the environment, the loss of tradition—is in some way linked to perceptions of the country whose economy and culture have the greatest influence on globalization: the United States. What people do not like about globalization they often blame on America. For instance, Pew polling has found that people tend to place at least some of the blame for growing inequality on the United States. In 32 of the 47 countries surveyed, at least 50 percent of respondents believed US policies contribute to the gap between rich and poor countries. At least 7 in 10 said this in the Palestinian territories (73 percent), France (73 percent), Germany (72 percent), Spain (72 percent), Kuwait (72 percent), Argentina (71 percent), and South Korea (70 percent). Even in the United States, nearly 4 in 10 (38 percent) said their country adds to global inequality.

When Pew asked respondents around the world which country is most responsible for pollution and environmental problems, they overwhelmingly named the United States. And US citizens did not necessarily disagree with this assessment: 33 percent named the United States, while China was a distant second at 22 percent.

When it comes to culture, the story is similar. Even in many places where American movies, television, and music are quite popular, people essentially say they have too much America in their lives and they worry about losing their own cultures and traditions to Americanization. In 37 of 46 countries (excluding the United States) at least half of those surveyed said the spread of American ideas and customs is having a negative impact on their own societies. Moreover, the number of people who take this view was up significantly from 2002 in several countries that are usually considered relatively “pro-American,” such as Britain and Bulgaria. On this issue, however, Americans themselves saw things quite differently than the rest of the world: two-thirds believed the spreading of American ideas and customs around the world is a good thing.

Globalization is not the main source of the growing anti-Americanism witnessed in the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere over the last few years. Opposition to US foreign policy is much more important in this regard. The war in Iraq, the US-led war on terror, perceptions that the United States acts unilaterally in foreign affairs—all of these issues are more central to US’ declining image. However, anxieties about globalization, and the fact that people blame the world’s sole superpower for the downsides of globalization, also contribute to US’ reputation problems.

Immigration Anxieties

In addition to concerns about money, jobs, ideas, and customs moving across borders, there is also considerable anxiety in many nations about the cross-border flow of people. Of course, globalization is not the only cause of immigration. For example, the war in Iraq has led many
Iraqis to leave their country in search of a more secure environment, which has in turn led to increased concerns about immigration in neighboring countries like Jordan. In 2002, 48 percent of Jordanians supported tighter controls on immigration; by 2007, 70 percent wanted tighter restrictions. Still, the movement of people across international borders in search of new and better opportunities in the global economy is part of the globalization story. When Pew asked respondents about the main reason people leave their country to live elsewhere, majorities or pluralities in 35 of the 36 countries where the question was asked cited jobs. This was true both in relatively poor and relatively wealthy countries. For example, while 98 percent of Senegalese said people leave their country for financial reasons, 96 percent said this in Poland and 94 percent in Slovakia, both of which are comparatively wealthy. Kuwait was the only place in which a plurality mentioned another reason: 27 percent of Kuwaitis said people leave to pursue education, while 24 percent named jobs.

The drive to cross national borders in pursuit of good jobs may be a key feature of globalization, but it generates apprehension almost everywhere. Jordanians are not alone in wanting more restrictions on immigration: majorities in 44 of 47 countries shared their sentiments. And in most countries surveyed, majorities believed that overall, immigrants are having a bad impact on their country.

Italy is a good example of a nation where concerns about both economic globalization and immigration are on the rise. Frustrated with anemic economic growth in recent years, Italians stand apart from the other Western European nations surveyed by Pew. They were the least enthusiastic about trade and foreign companies; they were among the least satisfied with their lives and the direction of their country; and they were the least optimistic about the future. The intensity of Italian concerns about immigration also sets them apart. Like much of Western Europe, over the last couple of decades Italy has wrestled with how to successfully integrate and assimilate its growing Muslim minority. More recently, an influx of Romanian immigrants—especially Roma, or gypsies from Romania—has generated renewed the controversies surrounding this issue. Nearly 3 in 4 Italians (73 percent) said immigrants are having a bad impact on their country, while nearly 9 in 10 (87 percent) said there should be tighter restrictions on immigration. And 64 percent of Italians rated immigration a very big problem for their country, which is highest not only among Western European countries, but among all 47 nations included in the survey.

Can Globalization Deliver?
The Italians are clearly outliers, but are they laggards who are simply behind the curve in embracing globalization, or are they harbingers of a coming backlash against globalization? The answer will most likely depend on how well globalization delivers for individuals and for countries. After all, it is in economically stagnant Western countries that we see the most trepidation about globalization. If current economic troubles continue, and if they spread to the middle income countries that have enjoyed impressive economic growth this decade, the fears and frustrations we see in Italy may become more commonplace.

“As is the case with trade, foreign companies enjoy their greatest support in some of the world’s poorest nations.”

Traders load up a canoe of merchandise in Ondo, Nigeria. Support for free trade is generally the highest among residents of lesser developed nations, many of whom are eager for access to new markets for goods and technology.