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**Working Paper**

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# Sustainable Development and U.S. Opposition

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## **Abstract**

The US government has long dragged its feet on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since these goals were adopted in 2015, 190 of the 193 United Nations member states have put forward Voluntary National Reviews of their SDG programmes. The United States has not. Since March 2025, the US government has gone from silent neglect to explicit opposition to the SDGs by objecting to a UN General Assembly resolution on the grounds that it supported the SDGs. This short Working Paper reviews the evidence available on countries' commitments for the SDGs and UN-based multilateralism. It argues that the world's majority in favour of sustainable development must — and will — carry the day against a tiny group of super wealthy and powerful US vested interests that work against the interests of current and future generations.

## **About the SDSN**

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) mobilizes scientific and technical expertise from academia, civil society, and the private sector to support practical problem solving for sustainable development at local, national, and global scales. The SDSN has been operating since 2012 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General. The SDSN is building national and regional networks of knowledge institutions, solution-focused thematic networks, and the SDG Academy, an online university for sustainable development.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	4
2. The US Support for the SDGs and UN-Based Multilateralism .....	4
3. Outlook: The Future of Sustainable Development .....	6
List of References.....	7

## 1. Introduction

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are now under direct attack by the US Government (USG). In a vote in March 2025<sup>i</sup>, the US opposed a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution proposed by the Government of Bahrain<sup>ii</sup> - a resolution about the “International Day of Peaceful Coexistence” - on the grounds that it supported Agenda 2030 and the SDGs:

*“We have, however, decided to call a vote on this resolution. We have a concern that this resolution is a reaffirmation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although framed in neutral language, Agenda 2030 and the SDGs advance a program of soft global governance that is inconsistent with U.S. sovereignty and adverse to the rights and interests of Americans. [...] Put simply, globalist endeavors like Agenda 2030 and the SDGs lost at the ballot box. Therefore, the United States rejects and denounces the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, and it will no longer reaffirm them as a matter of course.”*

The SDGs and the Paris Agreement were adopted in September and December 2015, respectively, with unanimity of the 193 UN member states, including the USG, and therefore boasted a global consensus that the US has now broken. In fact, the USG vote against the SDGs makes explicit an ongoing USG resistance to the UN sustainable development agenda and to UN-based multilateralism more generally.

## 2. The US Support for the SDGs and UN-Based Multilateralism

The USG has long dragged its feet on UN goals and treaties adopted by the vast majority of the world, though the USG has often reaffirmed certain UN declarations “as a matter of course” so as not to isolate the US diplomatically. The last major UN Treaty that the US Senate ratified was the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The US Senate did not ratify a growing list of treaties, including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The US has ratified only three of the nine core UN Human Rights’ treaties, fewer than any other G20 country.<sup>iii</sup>

When the parties to the UNFCCC began to implement the treaty by adopting the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the US balked. The Clinton Administration never put the Kyoto Protocol to a Senate Vote, and the US never joined it. When the US signed the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, the Obama Administration argued that Senate approval was not necessary. Trump

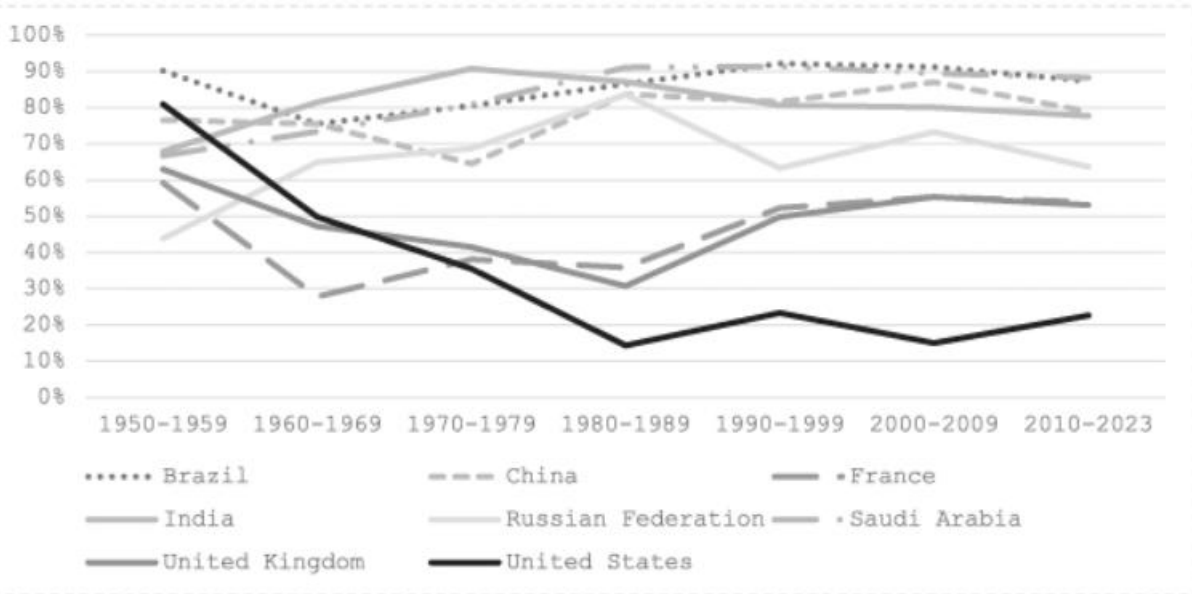
pulled the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement in 2020, and President Joe Biden returned in 2021. On the first day of his second term, Trump has once again notified the UN of his intention to pull the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement.

When it comes to the SDGs, the USG agreed to them in 2015, but then has been notable for its absence. 190 out of 193 UN member states have put forward Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of their national SDG programs. Only three countries have not, Haiti, Myanmar and the United States. The Biden Administration ignored the SDGs, and the US Treasury refused to mention them as a matter of internal policy (as privately explained to one of us). Now the USG has gone from silent neglect to public opposition.

What is the basis of the USG opposition? In recent decades, the US Congress and Presidents have increasingly resisted any UN treaty obligations or financial obligations arising from UN agreements. Of all the countries in the UN, the US is now the least aligned with UN treaties, votes in the UN General Assembly, and participation in UN organizations, according to quantitative measures that we have reported in recent years<sup>iv</sup>. The USG opposition is not just about sustainable development; the skepticism is about the UN-based multilateralism more generally<sup>v</sup>.

Of course, this was not the case for the US historically. President Franklin Roosevelt led the world in establishing the United Nations. During 1950-59, the U.S. votes at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) were with the voting majority 80% of the time. This fell to around 20% beginning in the 1980s. One reason has been USG opposition to repeated calls from the 1970s onward for international economic and financial reforms to benefit the poorer countries. Other issues that put the US in the voting minority include UNGA votes against Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories captured in the 1967 war, and UNGA votes calling for an end to unilateral economic sanctions, a policy instrument that the US deploys more than any other country<sup>vi</sup>.

**Fig 1. UNGA votes with the international majority (percent)**



Source: Lafortune, Guillaume and Jeffrey D. Sachs. (2024). The Index of Countries' Support for UN-based Multilateralism: Construction, Verification, and Correlates. Asian Economic Papers 2024.

<https://direct.mit.edu/asep/article/23/3/1/124683/The-Index-of-Countries-Support-for-UN-based>

### 3. Outlook: The Future of Sustainable Development

The US Government's current broadside against the SDGs does not reflect US public opinion – which broadly supports both the UN and the global climate change agenda<sup>viii</sup> – but does represent powerful interest groups, notably the wealthy campaign funders such as the Big Oil lobby. Regarding the SDGs in particular, several US States, municipalities, civil society and youth have championed the SDGs, with many preparing or getting involved in so-called Voluntary Local Reviews<sup>ix</sup>.

While the USG open opposition to the SDGs and Paris Agreement comes just as the global climate crisis is worsening dramatically<sup>x</sup>, the US opposition is likely to strengthen, not weaken, the resolve of the vast majority of nations. US politics now vividly and overtly pits the interests of the US super-rich and Big Oil against the vital interests of 8 billion people and of future generations. Bring on the politics. We believe that the world's majority will speak their minds and ultimately carry the day against a tiny group of super-wealthy and powerful US interests that are impeding progress for the rest of humanity.

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