

The U.S. Falls Behind Majority of the World in Reducing CO2 Emissions: The Case for Rejoining the Paris Agreement

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On November 4, 2020, while most of the world was obsessively watching the growing vote count between President Donald Trump and Democratic Presidential Nominee Joe Biden, the U.S. formally withdrew from the 2015 Paris Agreement.ⁱ The move was long anticipated after President Trump's June 1, 2017 announcement of his plan to end all participation in the climate change agreement as part of his America First policy, further stating that "the Paris accord [undermines the U.S. economy]."ⁱⁱ However, Article 28 of the Agreement, mandates that a Party may not announce its withdrawal until at least three years from the date the Agreement entered into force.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite the Agreement being ratified by 175 countries on December 21, 2015, it did not come into force until November 4, 2016.^{iv} In accordance with Article 28, President Trump formally filed the U.S. withdrawal on November 4, 2019.^v After the one-year withdrawal period, the U.S. is now officially the only country to have withdrawn from the Agreement.^{vi}

The withdrawal from the Paris Agreement has been heavily criticized and observed by the international community and environmental organizations, as well as prominent environmental activists such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Greta Thunberg.^{vii} After decades of relatively unsuccessful negotiations amongst the nearly 200 parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement is the first treaty in which all parties voluntarily agreed to address climate change and the challenge of adapting to its effects, while ensuring that developing countries do not get left behind.^{viii} The 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement's predecessor, applied only to developed nations and established penalties for failing to meet emissions reduction targets for only 37 industrialized countries.^{ix} Over the period from 2008 to 2012, the combination of these targets added up to a 5% emission reduction from the greenhouse gas levels (GHGs) in 1990.^x

In comparison, the Paris Agreement offers much greater flexibility as each Party has individualized "nationally determined contributions" (NDCs).^{xi} The Agreement acknowledges that developed nations are disproportionately responsible for the current climate crisis, but still holds every nation responsible for doing its part to combat climate change.^{xii} Parties are further required to report regularly on their emissions and efforts to transition to renewables, and a collective assessment is mandated every five years to review the Agreement's progress.^{xiii} Article 2 sets the long-term goal of curbing the global temperature from increasing to 2°C, but further aims to limit the increase from 1.5°.^{xiv}

Since the Paris Agreement entered into force, every nation on Earth has signed the Paris Agreement, with the latest signatory being Syria.^{xv} Russia, Turkey and Iran remain the only "major emitting countries" left to formally ratify the Agreement.^{xvi} After the U.S. withdrawal, 188 countries have ratified the Agreement.^{xvii}

Not only is the U.S. the only country to withdraw from the Agreement, but it is one of the only major global powers without a plan to address climate change or transition to renewables. Based on the [Climate Action Tracker](#) (CAT), an independent scientific analysis tool, China, India, Japan, the EU and the United Kingdom are among the powers projected to meet their NDC goals.^{xviii} However, there is still a large amount of work to be done in each of these Parties to ensure the global temperature stays below 2°C, let alone 1.5°.

In the EU, combatting climate change with renewable energy is one of the focus points for a post-COVID-19 economic recovery. As of July 2020, 30% of the EU's multi-annual budget (amounting to approximately €547 billion) will be dedicated to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 and the EU's emissions reduction goal by 2030. As of September 2019, the European Commission recommended a 55% emissions reduction goal. However, at least a 65% reduction is necessary for the EU to be in full compliance with its Paris Agreement commitment. Additionally, the European Green Deal aims to strengthen nearly all prior climate legislation, transition away from fossil fuels, and create millions of jobs in the clean energy sector.

According to [CAT](#), Japan is currently projected to overachieve its 2030 NDC target, with a 2.5% decrease in emissions between 2013-2018, 3.9% in 2018, and 7.5% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Japan's Basic Energy Plan aims to retire inefficient coal-fired power plants by 2030, and boost offshore wind power. However, there is currently no indication that transitioning to a green economy will be part of a COVID-19 recovery plan.

Although the UK's infamous exit from the EU means that it is no longer bound by the EU's target, the [CAT](#) still projects that the UK will reduce its emissions by 57% in accordance with its 2030 NDC target. In 2019, the UK formalized its 2050 net-zero emissions target into legislation and continues to strengthen its climate policies in preparation for hosting COP26, the first collective assessment of the Parties of the Paris Agreement. As part of its COVID-19 recovery plan, the UK committed £3 billion to strengthening energy efficient buildings and infrastructure. An additional £350 million will be invested to transition away from the fossil fuel industry. Over the course of 2019-2020, the UK has also proposed several "green" policies, including a £2 billion investment to improving infrastructure for walking and biking, reversing the bans on several wind and solar projects, and approving a large-scale rail project. A 2040 ban on fossil fuel vehicles and a ban on installing gas boilers in new homes are also anticipated.

In addition to the social and economic damages from the COVID-19 pandemic, India has also suffered several climate disasters, including Cyclone Amphan. In response to these challenges, India announced a large 10% GDP stimulus package, which will be partially invested in developing the renewable energy industry and increasing electric transportation. CO2 emissions in the country have been trending downward with increased use of renewable energy sources. Although there is no indication that India intends to stop coal-mining production, no new power stations have been constructed. There are increasing calls for the government to utilize a green recovery plan and to strengthen its air quality standards. Not only is India projected to meet its 2030 NDC target, but its target is also compatible with the Paris Agreement's 2°C limit.

Not only is China on target to reach its 2030 NDC target, but in September 2020, President Xi Jinping announced a heightened 2030 target, as well as a plan to reach peak emissions by 2030

and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. China's projected compliance and further commitment to combatting the climate crisis may come as a shock to those who supported U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on the basis that China was seizing the opportunity to manipulate global economies. The COVID-19 recovery plan proposed by the Chinese government reflects some aspects of transitioning to a green economy. Several large stimulus packages prioritized transitioning to a digital economy rather than reinforcing traditional energy industries, and demonstrate a commitment to accelerating renewable energy and electric transportation. The anticipated ¥17.5 trillion stimulus investment will support the New Infrastructure Plan, increasing charging stations and public transit, and funding a national high-speed rail. Of concern is China's continuing commitment to coal despite global trends towards renewables. However, the country's investments into overseas renewable projects have reached historic values, presenting the potential for a shift away from fossil fuels. Despite a consistent commitment to climate action, China is projected to overachieve its NDC 2030 targets.

Meanwhile, acknowledging the reality of climate change is an ongoing struggle in American politics, as debating whether climate change is real runs rampant amongst political parties. Although U.S. emissions are intended to fall below 2019 levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government has utilized this fact as a justification for pushing the fossil fuel industry to emit more GHGs without applying any mandated penalties.^{xix} This maneuver falls in stark contrast with the majority of the world, but what is there to lose? Actually, a lot.

With increasing global trends away from the fossil fuel industry, U.S. plans to invest larger and larger amounts into deforestation, coal mining, fracking and oil drilling becomes quite risky. As the global market trends away from these industries, the value of U.S. non-renewable resources will sharply decrease, leading to a second Depression, millions of jobs lost, a vulnerable energy grid and a huge risk to national security. Not to mention that as the rest of the world continues its efforts to reduce global emissions and curb global warming, if the U.S. remains one of, if not the, biggest polluter, this could mean grave consequences and sanctions from the international community. Without any investment or plans to transition towards renewable energy sources and a green economy, the U.S. will be left behind as the rest of the world continues to progress into a sustainable future. Refusing to acknowledge this reality and an unwillingness to accept the challenges of climate change will inevitably lead to the downfall of the U.S. superpower.

Rejoining the Paris Agreement is one of the first necessary steps that needs to be taken in order to meet these challenges. According to the parameters of the Agreement, it could take as little as one month to do so.^{xx} President-elect Joe Biden's intention to rejoin the Paris Agreement is essential, not only to reclaiming the U.S.'s place on the world stage and taking a stand against climate change, but in the nation's own survival and self-interest.^{xxi} The U.S. has everything to gain from recommitting to the Paris Agreement and establishing a firm stance against climate change. For one, investing in and transitioning towards renewable energy sources would create millions of safe, high-paying jobs in the green energy sector.^{xxii} Such a plan could drastically recover the economy from the COVID-19 pandemic. For another, divesting away from fossil fuels would assist in improving air and water quality, as well as improving the health of millions of Americans. Not to mention that five out of six U.S. voters want the U.S. to rejoin and participate in the Paris Agreement.^{xxiii}

A future of U.S. cooperation with the rest of the international community in the Paris Agreement presents infinite potential for U.S. prosperity and global human progress.

ⁱ *UN and partners express regret over US departure from Paris climate accord*, UN NEWS, (Nov. 4, 2020), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1076882>.

ⁱⁱ *Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord*, THE WHITE HOUSE, (June 1, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Art. 28, Conference of the Parties, Adoption of the Paris Agreement, U.N. DOC. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev/1 (Dec. 21, 2015).

^{iv} *What is the Paris Agreement?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/what-is-the-paris-agreement>.

^v Michael R. Pompeo, *Press Statement on the U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement*, U.S. DEP. OF STATE, (Nov. 4, 2019), <https://www.state.gov/on-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-the-paris-agreement/>.

^{vi} Ciara Nugent, *The U.S. Just Officially Left the Paris Agreement. Can it Be a Leader in the Climate Fight Again?*, TIME, (Nov. 4, 2020), <https://time.com/5907210/us-leaves-paris-agreement-2020-election/>.

^{vii} *UN and partners express regret over US departure from Paris climate accord*, UN NEWS, (Nov. 4, 2020), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1076882>; *see also*, Raisa Bruner, *Leonardo DiCaprio Slams Withdrawal From the Paris Accord. 'Our Planet Was Threatened By Trump's Careless Decision.'*, TIME, (June 2, 2017 11:07 AM EDT), <https://time.com/4803001/leonardo-dicaprio-on-trump-environment/>; *see also*, Valerie Volcovici, *Greta Thunberg to U.S. Congress on climate change: 'Wake up'*, REUTERS, (Sept. 18, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-thunberg-congress/greta-thunberg-to-u-s-congress-on-climate-change-wake-up-idUSKBN1W31CM>.

^{viii} *What is the Paris Agreement?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/what-is-the-paris-agreement>.

^{ix} *What is the Kyoto Protocol?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), *What is the Paris Agreement?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol.

^x *What is the Kyoto Protocol?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), *What is the Paris Agreement?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol.

^{xi} Conference of the Parties, Adoption of the Paris Agreement, U.N. DOC. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev/1 (Dec. 21, 2015).

^{xii} *What is the Paris Agreement?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/what-is-the-paris-agreement>.

^{xiii} *What is the Paris Agreement?*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/what-is-the-paris-agreement>.

^{xiv} Art. 2, Conference of the Parties, Adoption of the Paris Agreement, U.N. DOC. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev/1 (Dec. 21, 2015).

^{xv} Melissa Denchak, *Paris Climate Agreement: Everything You Need to Know*, NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL, (Dec. 12, 2018), <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/paris-climate-agreement-everything-you-need-know>.

^{xvi} Melissa Denchak, *Paris Climate Agreement: Everything You Need to Know*, NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL, (Dec. 12, 2018), <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/paris-climate-agreement-everything-you-need-know>.

^{xvii} *Paris Agreement – Status of Ratification*, UNFCCC NEWS, (2020), <https://unfccc.int/process/the-paris-agreement/status-of-ratification>.

^{xviii} The following climate action analysis of the EU, the UK, China, Japan, India and the US are based off of information provided by the Climate Action Tracker, available at <https://climateactiontracker.org>.

^{xix} Presidential Permits on Energy & Environment Issued July 29, 2020 & Oct. 5, 2020, THE WHITE HOUSE, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/?issue_filter=energy-environment; *see also*, *Executive Order on*

Promoting Energy Infrastructure and Economic Growth, THE WHITE HOUSE, (Apr. 10, 2019), https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/?issue_filter=energy-environment.

^{xx} Conference of the Parties, Adoption of the Paris Agreement, U.N. DOC. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev/1 (Dec. 21, 2015).

^{xxi} Christopher Brito, *Joe Biden vows to rejoin the Paris climate deal on first day of office if elected*, CBS NEWS, (Nov. 5, 2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/paris-climate-accord-biden-rejoin-president/>.

^{xxii} *Jobs: Fossil Fuels versus Clean Energy*, CITIZENS' CLIMATE LOBBY, (Apr. 9, 2020), <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/laser-talks/jobs-fossil-fuels-vs-renewables/>; *see also*, Silvio Marcacci, *Renewable Energy Boom Creates Economic Opportunity As Coal Industry Slumps*, FORBES, (Apr. 22, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/energyinnovation/2019/04/22/renewable-energy-job-boom-creating-economic-opportunity-as-coal-industry-slumps/?sh=63d13cdd3665>.

^{xxiii} Anthony Leiserowitz, Edward Malbach et al., *By more than 5 to 1, voters say the U.S. should participate in the Paris Climate Agreement*, YALE PROGRAM ON CLIMATE CHANGE COMMUNICATION, (Apr. 17, 2017), <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/5-1-voters-say-u-s-participate-paris-climate-agreement/>.