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The U.S. Election and the World

E. William Colglazier

The issues highlighted in the U.S. presidential election constituted a stark contrast with the consensus views of the world’s political leadership regarding the most important issues facing humanity. In particular, many of the negotiated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contained in the United Nations 2030 Agenda—endorsed by all countries in 2015 and covering seventeen broad issues that affect every society—rarely appeared in the U.S. public debate.

Informed by focus groups, surveys, social media, and political coverage, American news outlets and political campaigns selected a narrow set of issues they viewed as most important to the U.S. electorate. The questions and answers during the three general-election presidential debates focused on those issues, and a populist backlash heavily influenced the voting outcome. Yet making progress domestically and internationally on all seventeen SDGs is crucial for U.S. prosperity and security. The new administration is confronted with the challenge of broadening the public dialogue to encompass what is really important for America’s future.

The seventeen goals can be divided among the “five Ps”:

- People (SDGs 1–5): no poverty, zero hunger, good health, quality education, gender equality
- Prosperity (SDGs 6–10): clean water, clean energy, economic growth, industry

- and innovation, reduced inequalities
- Planet (SDGs 11–15): sustainable cities, sustainable consumption and production, climate action, oceans, terrestrial ecosystems
- Peace (SDG 16)
- Partnerships (SDG 17)

Tallying the frequency with which particular words occurred in the presidential debate transcripts results in a crude but illuminating priority list. For example, “jobs/economy/economics” occurred 121 times (SDG 8); “woman/women” occurred 81 times (SDG 5); “security/peace/crime,” 36 times (SDG 16); “health,” 35 times (SDG 3); “energy,” 31 times (SDG 7); “city/cities,” 27 times (SDG 11); and “education,” 15 times (SDG 4). The other goals were hardly mentioned or not mentioned at all.

It is not surprising that jobs, health, energy, security, cities, and education issues received high priority in the campaign. On gender, the denigrating language of our president-elect raised the issue to an extraordinary level. And even though views vary considerably on how to address these seven highlighted SDGs, the issues themselves are universally important. The other ten goals are also critically important. Hot topics prominent in the campaign, such as trade and immigration, are imbedded in the SDGs, but the public debate hardly acknowledged their relevance for American innovation and economic growth.

The United States has challenges in achieving societal consensus on what to do on every goal. Yet America has a special asset that advances our national interests and allows us to influence other countries regarding the SDGs. We are the recognized world leader in science, technology, and innovation (STI). Almost every country now sees STI as crucial for its prosperity, competitiveness, and security—they seek to engage with our universities, research labs, and high-tech companies. The United Nations views STI as essential for achieving the SDGs. In the presidential debate transcripts, however, the word “science” appears only once and “technology” three times; “sustainability” never comes up.

The global trends in STI create a significant opportunity for the United States if we can utilize our capabilities to address the SDGs domestically and internationally. The top challenge involves getting the attention of our political leadership, the American public, and our domestic science and technology community. Making progress will require greater consensus on the importance of the SDGs and the actions needed. This will, in turn, require engagement of all societal sectors (e.g., government, private companies, philanthropies, universities, and civil society) to identify key problems, forge road maps and action plans, create public-private partnerships, advise on what is and what is not working, and accelerate innovation.

Since the seventeen goals are interrelated and interdependent, the worldwide science community needs to focus more on maximizing synergies, minimizing tradeoffs, and helping advise on the best pathways for progress on all the goals

together. One cause for optimism is that a focus on STI for SDGs appeals to the idealism of creative young scientists and engineers in every country.

Visionary leadership to overcome the negative rhetoric that pervaded our election is paramount. A key message for our politicians to communicate to our public involves the importance of strengthening the scientific, technological, and innovative capacity of all countries, including the infrastructure for providing scientific advice to inform policy choices. These steps will help promote more knowledge-based societies worldwide and accelerate the successful pursuit of innovative solutions to our domestic and global challenges.

If the United States maintains its worldwide scientific leadership with the right policies and investments, then having more countries focusing on STI for the 17 SDGs will benefit America as well as the world. **SD**