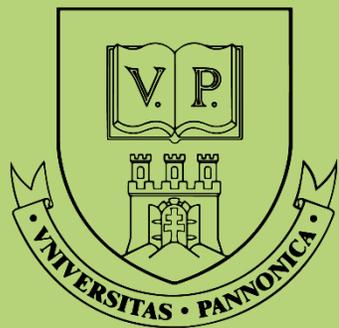


# PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABILITY

SÁNDOR CZEGLÉDI



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# Outline

**Overall aim:** To map the contexts in which U.S. presidents have used the term “sustainability” throughout the past decades.

**Corpus:** American Presidency Project database

- 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability**
- 2. American Presidents and Sustainability**
- 3. Aims, Corpus and Method**
- 4. Findings and Discussion**
- 5. Conclusion**

# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

**Misused clichés?** (“Greenwashing,” “virtue signaling”);

**Oxymoronic concepts?:** “sustainable growth/development”

First documented occurrence: “**sustainable growth**”:

*United States Investor* (1956, p. 15). Economic/financial context.

“**sustainable development**” / “**sustainability**”: from the 1970s/80s

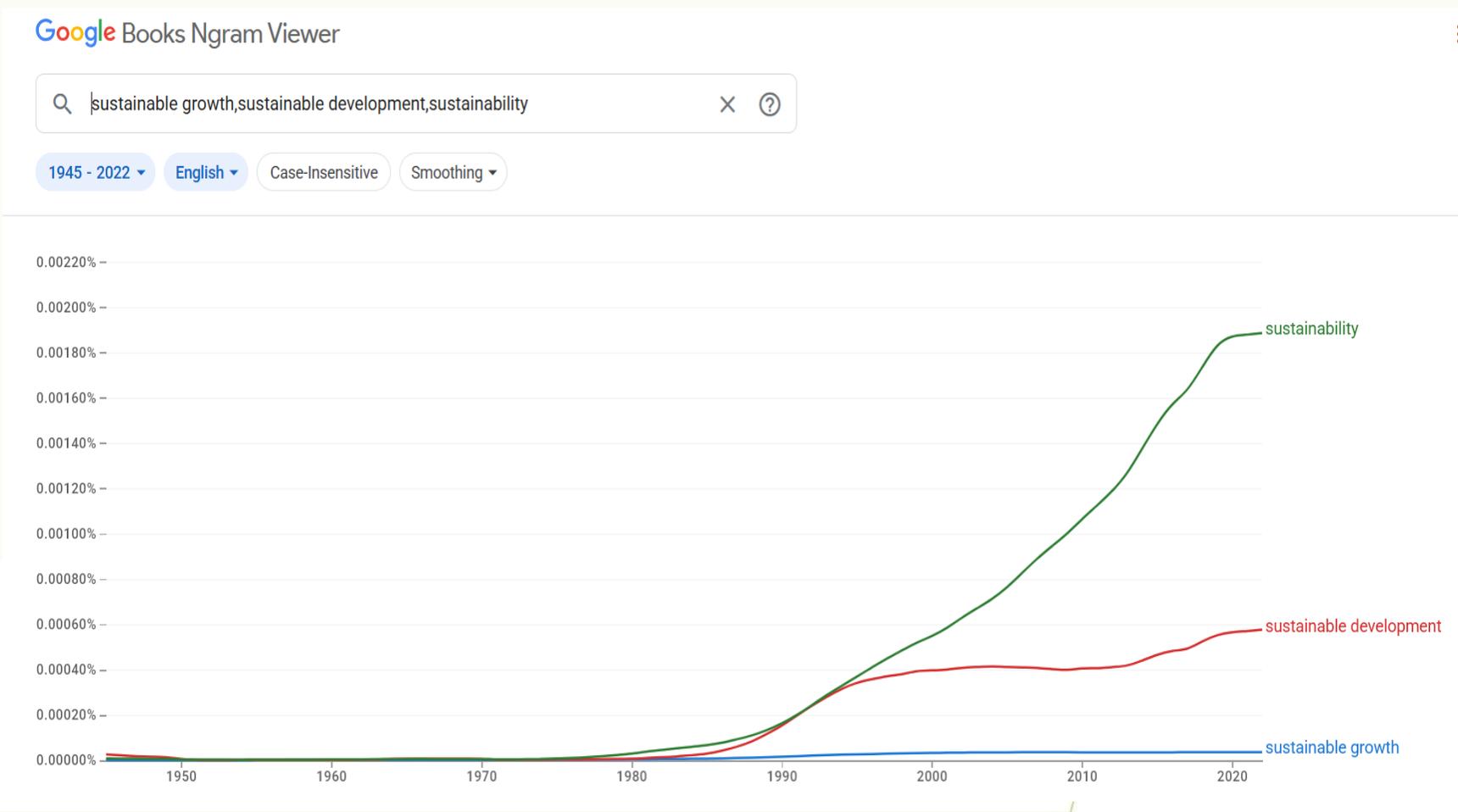


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# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

The relative frequencies of “sustainable growth,” “sustainable development” and “sustainability” in the Google Books database (Google, n.d.)



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# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

Milestones:

- ***The Limits to Growth*** (Meadows et al, 1972):

Exponential population growth + the uncritical exploitation of finite resources = disaster. → environmental (+social) policies also needed.

- **Brundtland Report** (1987):

**“sustainable development” = “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”** (Deliberate “strategic ambiguity”)



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# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

From the early 2000s: „The three-legged stool” metaphor



**But:**

The environment is „the floor upon which the stool, or any sustainable development model, must stand.”

(Dawe & Ryan, 2003, p. 1459)

<https://nexuspointblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/01/social-sustainability>



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# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

**Internationally coordinated UN efforts to eliminate extreme poverty:**

**The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** from 2000 to 2015.

**Goals:** the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger through

- the promotion of universal primary education,
- gender equality,
- the reduction of child mortality,
- combating HIV/AIDS, and
- ensuring environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2015 July, pp. 4-7).



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# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** from 2015 (to 2030).

*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development:* “to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” (United Nations, 2015, September 25, p. 1/35)

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



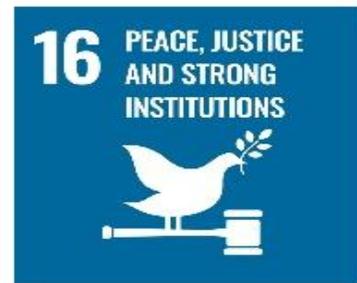
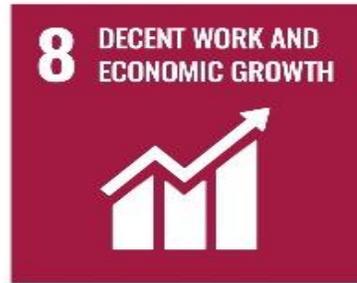
The 17 **SDGs** and their **169 associated targets** are deemed to be “**integrated and indivisible,**” forming “a broad and universal policy agenda,” (p. 6/35) which is a historically unprecedented enterprise.



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# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



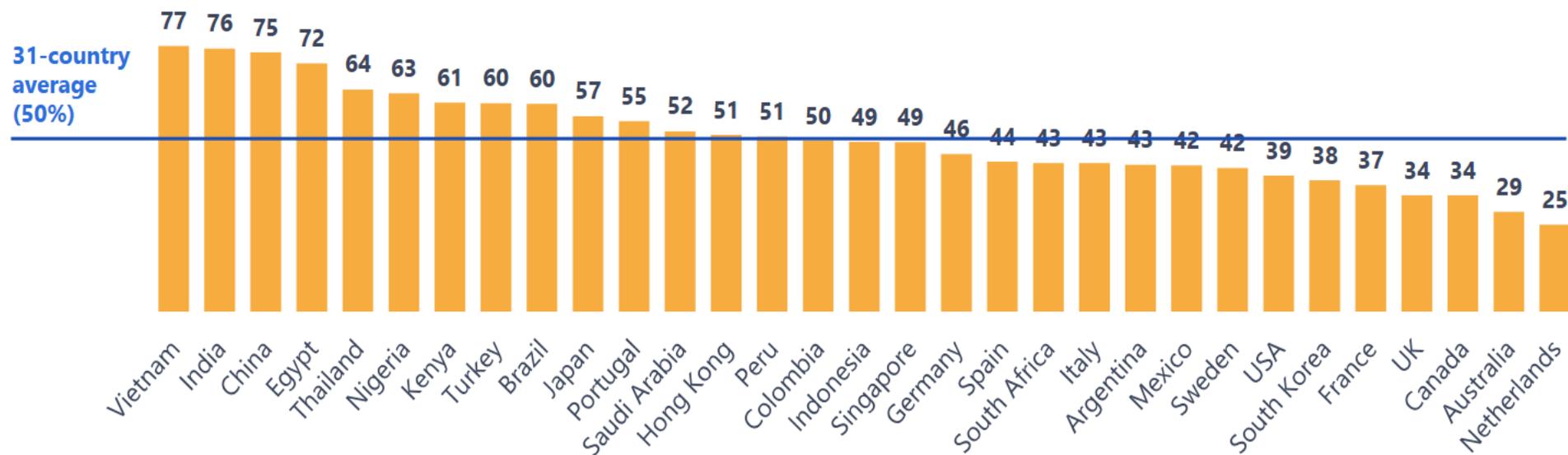
# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

- **Are we familiar with the SDGs?**

“Before today, how much have you seen, heard, or read about these Global Goals – a lot, some, a little, or nothing at all?”  
(GlobeScan, 2023, p. 4)

## Awareness of the SDGs

“A Lot” and “Some,” by Country, 2023



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# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

## Criticism of the SDGs:

- “Merely a voluntary aspirational wish list” (Androff & Damanik, 2024, 55.30);
- “empty and unenforceable”;
- “incomplete and inadequate”;
- “contradictory” (cf. the oxymoronic nature of sustainable development);
- promote the neoliberal capitalist agenda and reinforce global inequities;
- “difficult to quantify, measure, implement, and monitor.” (Androff & Damanik, 2024, 53.11-53.27).



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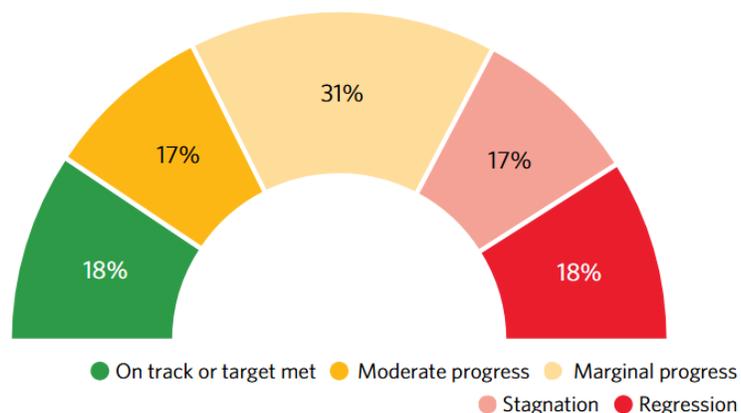
# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

- **Criticism of the SDGs: Only 35 per cent of SDG targets are on track or making moderate progress, while 18 per cent (especially the ones related greenhouse gas emissions, peace and security, migration) are in reverse.**

(United Nations, 2025, p. 2).

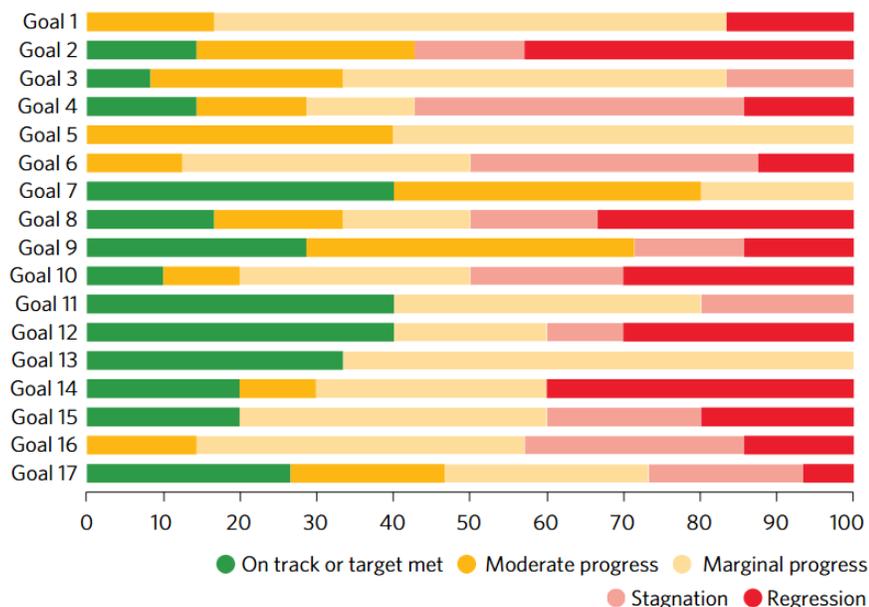
## SDG progress assessment charts (Source: United Nations, 2025, p. 4)

Overall progress across targets based on 2015-2025 global aggregate data



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Progress assessment for the 17 Goals based on assessed targets, by Goal (percentage)



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# 1. Introduction: From Sustainable Growth to Sustainability

## The Trump Administration:

Withdrawing from the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs for advancing a program of

- “soft global governance ... inconsistent with U.S sovereignty”; and due to
- “gender and climate ideology.” (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2025).



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## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **Thomas Jefferson:** The environment “belongs in usufruct to the living,” i.e. we can exercise only temporary stewardship rights. (Ball, 2000, qtd. in Hempel, 2013, p. 70).

Sustainability as a technical term: in the early literature about German forestry.

Hans Carl von Carlowitz (1713): “nachhaltende Nutzung,” i.e. “sustainable use”

(Du Pisani, 2006, p. 85, qtd. in Hempel, 2013, p. 70).

- **Ulysses S. Grant:** signing the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act (1872).
- **Benjamin Harrison:** signing into law the precursor to the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, which eventually laid the foundations of the national forest system.

(Graham, 2015, p. 27)

## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **Theodore Roosevelt:** “conservation crusade”, setting up the United States Forest Service (USFS), establishing “150 national forests, 51 federal bird reserves..., 5 national parks, and 18 national monuments” (National Park Service, 2017) through the **American Antiquities Act (1906)**. (Graham, 2015, p. 34)
- **Franklin D. Roosevelt:** New Deal, **Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (1933)** “to conserve land and natural resources and raised public awareness of the outdoors and the importance of natural resource preservation” (National Park Service, 2020)
- **Lyndon B. Johnson:** **Clean Air Act** of 1963, enabling the implementation of pollution control measures (Environmental Protection Agency, 2025).



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## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **Richard Nixon:** An impressive environmental record. (Reacting to Earth Day demonstrations. Opportunism?). **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (1970); Clean Air Act of 1970, the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973** (Graham, 2015, p. 220-238).

**The 1970s:** The “first environmental epoch” in the U.S.; emphasis on “regulation for environmental protection.”

**The 1980s:** A backlash against regulations in the name of efficiency and flexibility (Mazmanian & Nijaki, 2013, p. 186)



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## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **George H. W. Bush (1989-1993):** Endorses Agenda 21 in 1992, a policy explicitly calling for sustainable development. (A non-binding action plan.)  
↔ “Twenty years ago, some spoke of the limits to growth. Today we realize that growth is the engine of change and the friend of the environment” (Bush, 1992).
- **Bill Clinton (1993-2001):** The first president to actually promote the term “sustainable development” as administration policy, mostly through his executive orders (Hempel, 2013, p. 79). The **President’s Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD)** (1993); “**greening**” the government (requiring agencies to buy recycled and environmentally preferable goods, cut energy use and improve energy efficiency) (Clinton, 1993). “**Environmental justice**” (Clinton, 1994).

Clinton signs the **Kyoto Protocol (1998)**

but does not send it to the Senate.

## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **G. W. Bush (2001-2009): Rejects the Kyoto Protocol** formally in 2001, arguing that it exempted “80 percent of the world, including major population centers such as China and India, from compliance, and would cause serious harm to the U.S. economy” (Bush, 2001).
- **Barack Obama (2009-2017):** A powerful climate, conservation and sustainability agenda. Relying on the Clean Air Act, **power plant and vehicle greenhouse gases are regulated** (National Highway..., 2010; Environmental Protection Agency, 2015), EO 13693: federal agencies to cut GHG emissions (Executive Office of the President, 2015). Joins the legally binding **Paris Agreement in 2016.**



  
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## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **Donald Trump (2017-2021):** The first withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Agreement (completed in 2020);
- **Joe Biden (2021-2025):** The U.S. re-enters the Agreement in April 2021 and promises to cut net GHG emissions 50–52% below 2005 levels by 2030, and also submits a long-term strategy targeting net-zero by 2050 (U.S. Department of State, 2021).
- **President Trump (2025- ):** Yet another 180-degree policy turn: Executive Order 14162, directing **U.S. withdrawal again** (Executive Office of the President, 2025).



<https://www.cnbc.com/2025/01/21/davos-trumps-paris-climate-agreement-retreat-prompts-warning-from-un.html>

  
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## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **Donald Trump (2025- ):** unwinding or weakening almost all the major Obama- and Biden-era environmental policies, including emission standards, water and endangered animal protection rules and federal sustainability policies.
- **Deregulation and fossil-energy expansion: Biden's (2021-2025) “whole-of-government climate strategy,” “green” infrastructure investment policies** (mostly associated with the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021 (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021); the Inflation Reduction Act (2022) with the largest ever clean-energy incentives (focusing on e.g. clean power, manufacturing, buildings, EVs, methane fee) (U.S Department of Energy, Loan Programs Office, 2023) **are either immediately undone** by Trump's executive orders in January, 2025 **or are being phased out by revised tax incentives.**



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## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

- **Donald Trump (2025- ):**

**Recent tax policies (“One Big Beautiful Bill Act” of 2025)**

- **Curtail or end clean-energy (especially wind and solar) tax credits (including EV purchase credits);**
- **Facilitate fossil fuel expansion on public lands and water; although**
- **Nuclear, hydropower, geothermal energy are still supported; and**
- **Carbon capture technologies are encouraged** (Internal Revenue Service, 2025).



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## 2. American Presidents and Sustainability

**Presidential “greenness”** (Vig, 2013, pp. 309-310, extended and updated)

- **Nixon and G. H. W. Bush:** “opportunistic leaders”
- **Carter and Clinton:** “frustrated underachievers”
- **Obama and Biden:** “temporary achievers”
- **Reagan and George W. Bush:** “rollback advocates”
- **Donald Trump:** “rollback agent”



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### 3. Aims, Corpus and Method

- To focus on the primary documents of the presidents to map **SDG-related policy proposals and attitudes**.
- The **American Presidency Project** database (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>) maintained by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley at the University of California, Santa Barbara.
- **Keyword search: “sustainability” in the “presidential” document category.**
- **222 relevant records on October 1, 2025.**
- **Classification according to SDGs to reveal long-term patterns.**

The American Presidency Project

ABOUT SEARCH

UC SANTA BARBARA

DOCUMENTS

STATISTICS

MEDIA ARCHIVE

PRESIDENTS

ANALYSES

GIVE



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **The first recorded use of “sustainability”: 1983** (Reagan, March 19).
- “Sustainable growth” appears already in 1958: Dwight D. Eisenhower: “Annual Message Presenting the Economic Report to the Congress” (Eisenhower, 1958, January 20).
- **“Sustainable Development Goals”** were only mentioned by **Barack Obama** (in 18 documents from 2015 onwards) and by **Joe Biden** (in 21 records).

**Donald Trump: 0 SDG references.**



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **The first reference to the SDGs in any presidential document** was made by then-Chancellor of Germany, **Angela Merkel**, in February 2015, at a news conference with Barack Obama (Obama, 2015, February 9). **Obama still used “sustainable growth”** at the same event, as a desired goal within the Eurozone”
- **The second reference to the SDGs: By the Prime Minister of Ethiopia** at a news conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, praising the agreement on coordinating U.S. and Ethiopian efforts to fight climate change (Obama, 2015, July 27). **In his reply, Obama acknowledged that “Ethiopia is now helping to shape a new set of sustainable development goals for the world”** (ibid.).



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

President	Number of relevant records
Ronald Reagan (1981-1989)	5
George H. W. Bush (1989-1993)	3
Bill Clinton (1993-2001)	11
G. W. Bush (2001-2009)	12
Barack Obama (2009-2017)	89
Donald Trump (1 <sup>st</sup> term, 2017-2021)	17
Joe Biden (2021-2025)	83
Donald Trump 2 <sup>nd</sup> term (2025- )	2

The distribution of the 222 presidential documents containing the word “sustainability” in the American Presidency Project database until October 1, 2025

## 4. Findings and Discussion

President	Executive Orders	Memoranda
Ronald Reagan (1981-1989)		
George H. W. Bush (1989-1993)		
Bill Clinton (1993-2001)	1	
G. W. Bush (2001-2009)	1	
Barack Obama (2009-2017)	10	10
Donald Trump (1 <sup>st</sup> term, 2017-2021)	5	3
Joe Biden (2021-2025)	5	2
Donald Trump 2 <sup>nd</sup> term (2025- )	1	

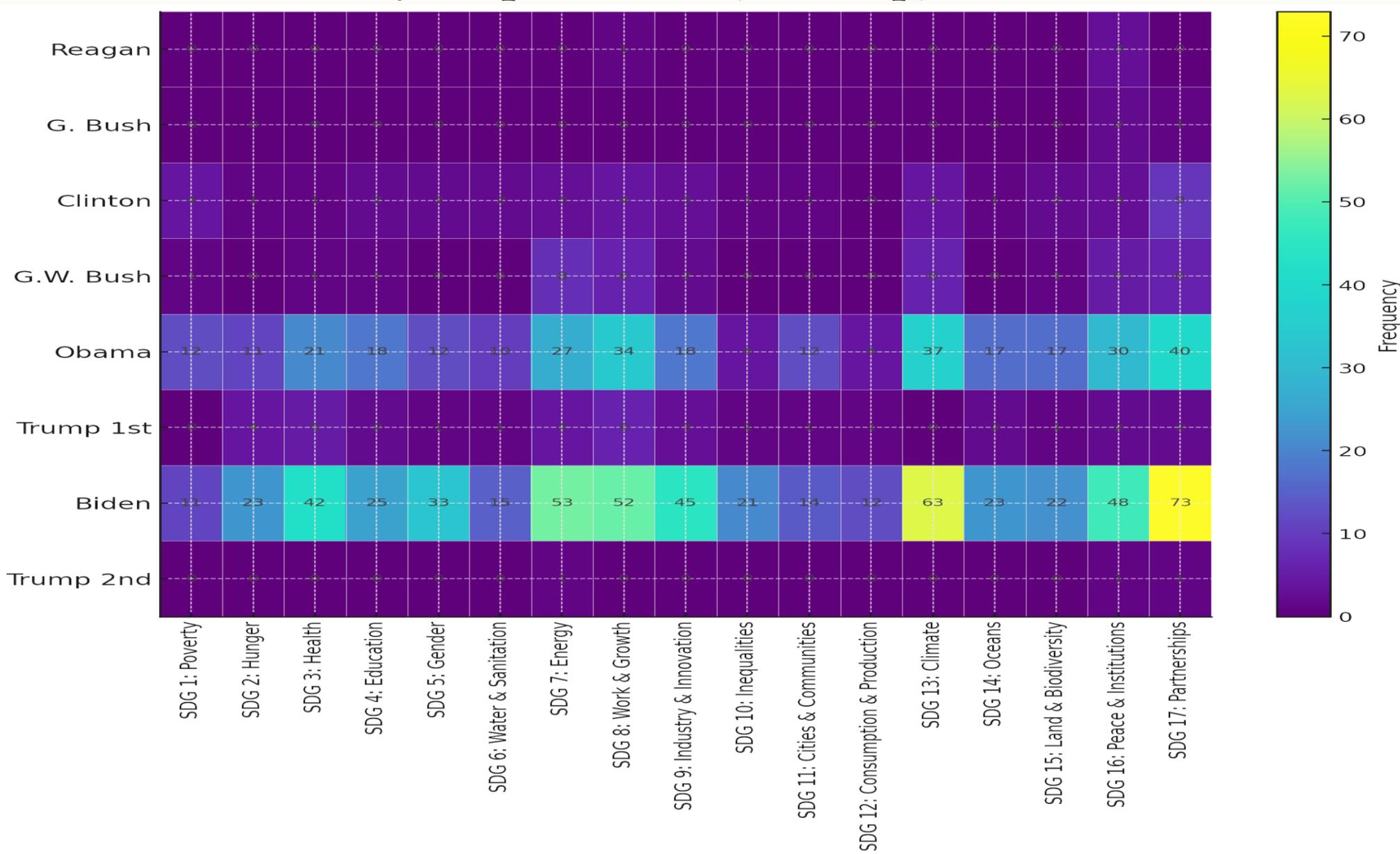
The distribution of executive orders and memoranda in the presidential “sustainability”-subcorpora until October 1, 2025



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# 4. Findings and Discussion: Frequencies of SDG-related references by US presidents (heatmap)



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **Barack Obama and Joe Biden’s** documented statements, remarks and policy initiatives **covered the full range of SDGs**. They are the **“greenest”** from the **“sustainability”** perspective, **and also the most “internationalist”** as well, since the vast majority of their records emphasized global or multilateral cooperation in tackling SDG-related challenges.
- Taking office in the midst of the Great Recession of 2008-2009, **Obama’s first priority was to rebuild the global financial system and restore fiscal sustainability** as well as economic growth (Obama, 2010, June 16). **After 2015, he embraced a more comprehensive SDG-based sustainability agenda.**



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **Joe Biden:** The US was placing the climate crisis “at the forefront of... foreign policy and national security planning,” and, consequently, the country was rejoining the Paris Agreement (Biden, 2021, January 27).

For Biden, “**building an inclusive, fair, climate-friendly, sustainable, rules-based global economy**” (Biden, 2021, June 10) remained a top priority throughout his presidency.

- **By contrast, Republican presidents promoted a considerably narrower range of SDGs as part of their international policy agenda.**



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **Ronald Reagan** emphasized the need to **“invest in peace through strength”** and abhorred the idea of military budget cuts (Reagan, 1983, March 19). **The sustainability of the military** remained the major context in which Reagan used the word, although during his second term **he also warned against e.g. the employment of “persistent protectionist pressures”** in order not to **“impair sustainability of [global economic] growth”** (Reagan, 1986, May 6).
- **G. H. W. Bush** also emphasized the importance of **military sustainability** initially but later he expressed his **concerns about population growth** potentially jeopardizing sustainable development (Bush, 1992, October 31).



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **George W. Bush:** a more multifaceted sustainability agenda after 2001: **clean energy and the reduction of energy dependence on foreign sources** was a top priority (at least at the level of rhetoric), **yet he rejected the (legally binding) Kyoto Protocol** (Bush, 2007, October 15).

Besides, he assumed a **highly internationalist, neoconservative foreign policy stance, calling for the promotion of “peace, democracy, freedom, the rule of law and respect for human rights in the world to make it more secure, safe, and prosperous for all mankind”** (Bush, 2006, June 21).

In this respect, he shared the same platform with Clinton and especially with Biden.



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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **Trump (1<sup>st</sup> term international, “sustainability”-related policies) beyond the first U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement: focused on outer space.**
  - The **Memorandum on National Space Traffic Management Policy** warned that **space was becoming “increasingly contested and congested,”** and **urged the development of “a new approach to space traffic management”** in order to maintain U.S. leadership” (Trump, 2018, June 18).
  - Trump promised to ensure **“the safety, stability, security, and long-term sustainability of space activities,”** and threatened to **“deter, counter, and defeat threats in the space domain that are hostile to the national interests of the United States and its allies”** (Trump, 2020, December 9).
  - He also stated that **“the ability to use space nuclear power and propulsion (SNPP) systems safely, securely, and sustainably** is vital to maintaining and advancing United States dominance and strategic leadership in space” (Trump, 2020, December 16).

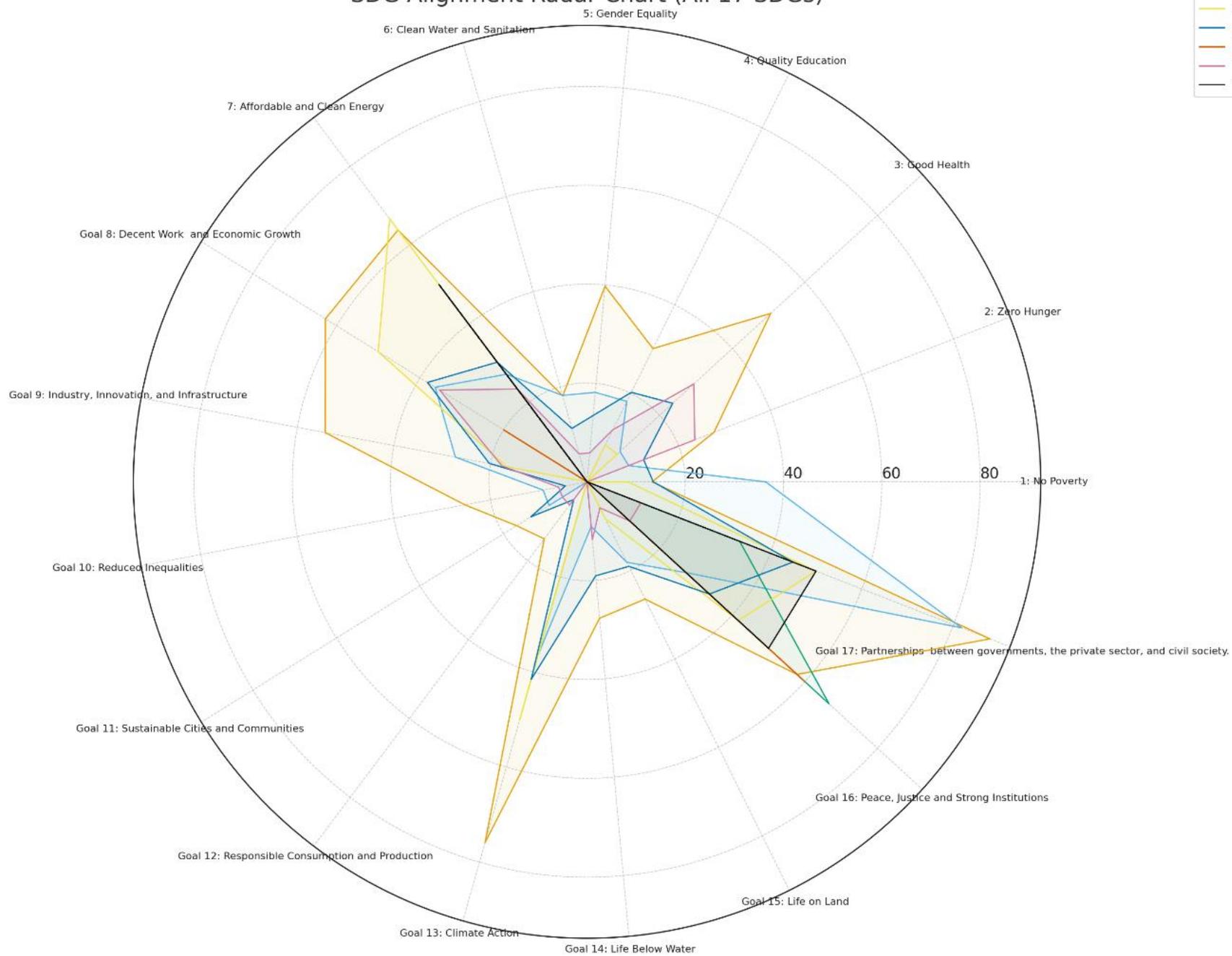


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# SDG Alignment Radar Chart (All 17 SDGs)

- Biden
- Clinton
- G. Bush
- G.W. Bush
- Obama
- Reagan
- Trump 1st
- Trump 2nd



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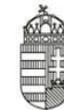
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## 4. Findings and Discussion

- **“Decent work and economic growth” (SDG 8):** the least divisive goal.
- **“Responsible consumption and production” (SDG 12)** is more risky, especially when people are asked to reduce their individual consumption levels significantly.
- **Obama:** urging Americans to rededicate themselves to **“thoughtful resource management at home and in the workplace”** (Obama, 2011, November 15). **Federal agencies were to adopt policies to increase energy efficiency, reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, conserve water, eliminate waste and procure “green” products and services** (Obama, 2009, October 5).
- **Donald Trump did not emphasize individual responsibility** as much as Obama, but he also issued an **EO to compel executive departments and agencies to eliminate “unnecessary use of resources”**

(including energy and water consumption),

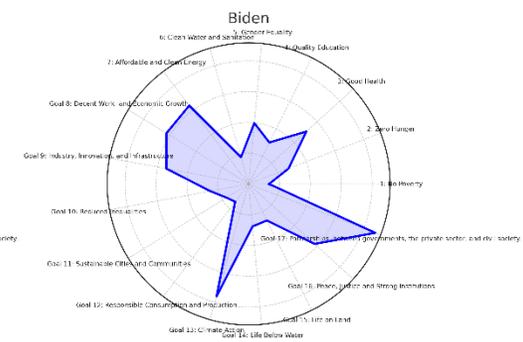
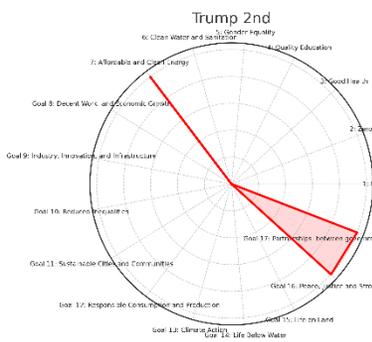
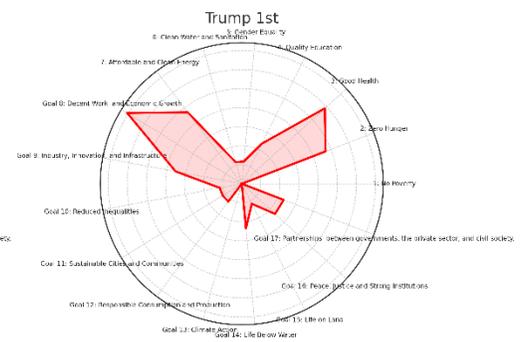
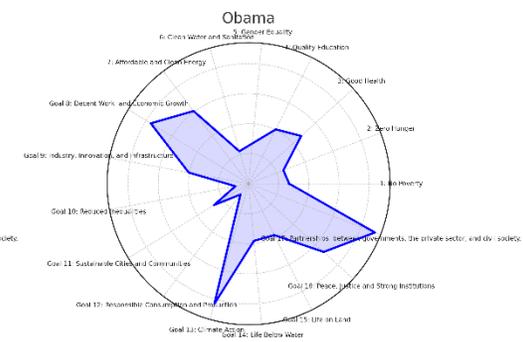
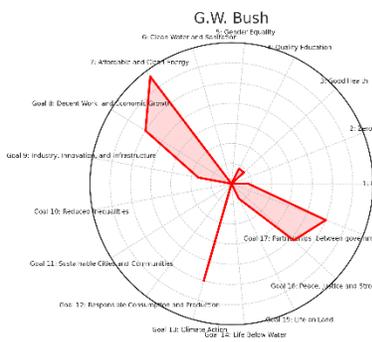
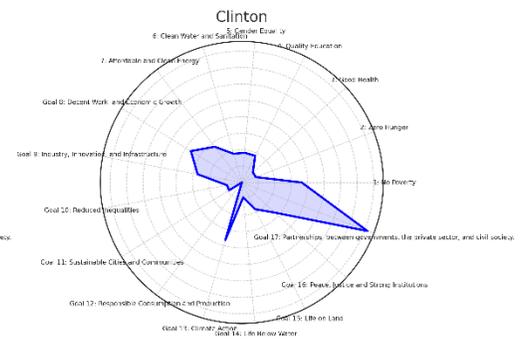
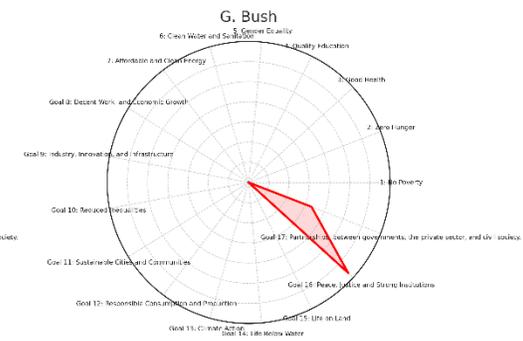
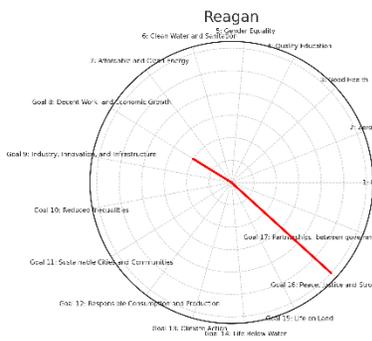
and **“protect the environment”** (Trump, 2018, May 17).



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# SDG Alignment Radar Charts by President (All 17 SDGs, Chronological)



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## 4. Findings and Discussion: Bipartisan SDG priorities? (False.)

- The development goals where overlaps appear between Republicans and Democrats (judging from the number of SDG-related references only) are “clean” energy (SDG 7) and healthcare (SDG 3). Yet, the interpretation of “clean” often includes fossil fuels (and definitely nuclear power) for Trump, not only renewables.
- Good health (SDG 3) was largely tied by Obama to the drafting and implementation of his signature **Affordable Care Act** (Obama, 2009, April 8)
- **Trump: attempts to undo “Obamacare”** in the name of restoring choice and control to the American patient” (Trump, 2020, September 24).
- In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Biden prioritized vaccination, dose-sharing, and manufacturing partnership**  
(Biden, 2021, September 22).

## 4. Findings and Discussion: Most partisan SDG priorities

- **Trump’s reasons for withdrawal from the SDGs:**
  - emerging “soft global governance”
  - “gender and climate ideology” (United States Mission to the United Nations, 2025).

Indeed, these are the least compatible goals between Trump’s program and the Democratic agenda.

- **SDG 17 (“Partnership between governments”)** has been neglected deliberately in the “sustainability” context by the Republicans since the G. W. Bush presidency.
- **“Climate”** was practically never mentioned in the Trump subcorpus—Joe Biden, however, used it more than 700(!) times.
- **“Gender equality” (SDG 5):** The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly referred only to the “the empowerment of all women and girls” (United Nations, 2015, September 25, p. 18/35) but the Biden Administration deliberately broadened the interpretation of the original SDG to **LGBTQIA+** persons (Biden, 2023, May 20).

## 5. Conclusion

- **“Sustainability”** has completed a long, **semantic evolutionary trajectory** from an early, defense-and-readiness frame under Reagan to a far broader, SDG-influenced agenda under Obama and especially Biden.
- **Thematic coding shows where the two parties converge and diverge.** E.g. both speak comfortably about SDG 8 (in the context of “growth and jobs”), while SDG 12 (“responsible consumption/production”), **climate-centric goals and gender issues most clearly divide them.**
- **Trump has proved how volatile previous national commitments may be if long-term bipartisan support and public awareness behind these policies are missing.**



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„A **TKP2021-NKTA-21** azonosítószámú projekt a Kulturális és Innovációs Minisztérium Nemzeti Kutatási Fejlesztési és Innovációs Alapból nyújtott támogatásával, a 2021. évi Tématerületi Kiválóság Program pályázati program finanszírozásában valósult meg.”



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