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# Surprise: Americans increasingly value the UN for defending human rights

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# Surprise: Americans increasingly value the UN for defending human rights

Published with [Brookings](#) in “Commentary: What’s at stake at UNGA 2025?”

Shibley Telhami

The United Nations General Assembly convenes this year in the shadow of what may be the greatest challenge to the international rules-based order since its inception after World War II, partly [due](#) to the global stance of the Trump administration. Yet a plurality of Americans, including pluralities of Democrats and Republicans, want the U.S. to rely on international organizations such as the U.N. in advocating human rights globally—something that three-quarters of Americans now support, according to our latest University of Maryland [poll](#).

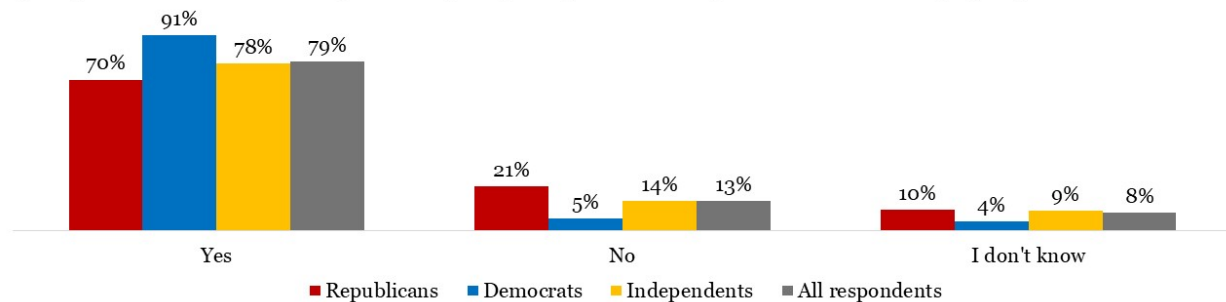
There are many reasons for the challenge the U.N. faces, including the [changing](#) global distribution of economic and military power and the [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#). Israel’s assault on Gaza, following Hamas’ attack, has severely [tested](#) the limits to international institutions in confronting what U.N. entities—such as a recent U.N. [commission](#) of inquiry— consider to be grave violations of laws and U.N. resolutions, including what major [human rights organizations](#) and the largest international [association](#) of genocide scholars have found to be war crimes, even genocide.

Certainly, the Trump administration has not only been perceived as [undermining](#) international institutions but also withdrawing from U.N. processes and entities, including those focused on human rights, such as the [U.N. Human Rights Review](#), as well as [UNESCO](#), and [sanctioning](#) other important international organizations, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). This has all added up to a [sense](#) that global order is under assault. One outcome for the center stage Israeli-Palestinian issue has been that Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas is [prevented](#) from

attending the UNGA meeting, in what some see as a [violation](#) of the 1947 U.N. Headquarters Agreement, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is wanted by the ICC for alleged [war crimes](#), is welcomed.

Remarkably, amid all this, Americans increasingly want their government to advocate for human rights globally—and to rely mostly on international organizations, instead of acting unilaterally. The latest University of Maryland poll finds that that 79% of Americans want the U.S. to defend human rights globally—up from 65% of Americans who said the same last year.

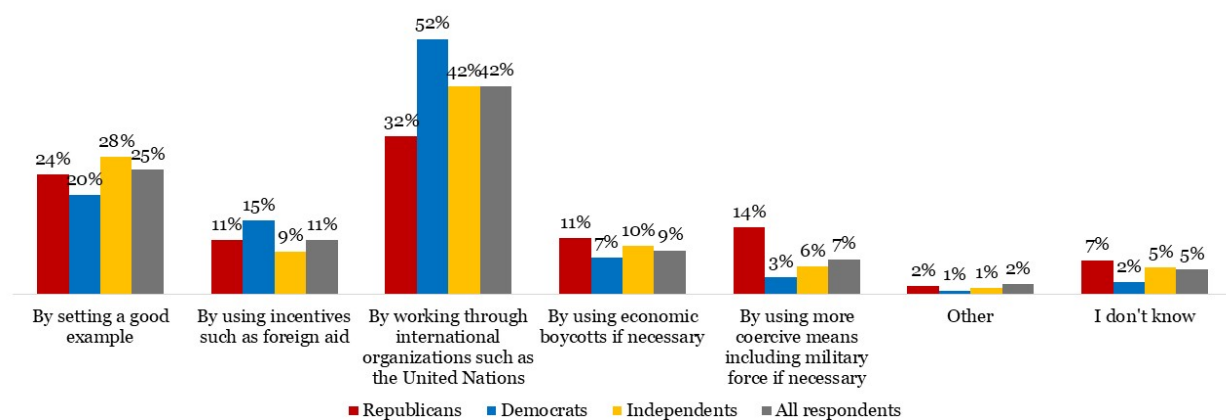
Q. Do you believe that defending human rights globally should be a goal of American foreign policy?



Source: University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll with SSRS, July 29 – August 7, 2025, among a sample of 1,514 respondents, with a MoE of +/- 2.9%.

When asked about the best way to defend human rights, a plurality, 42%, preferred “working through international organizations such as the United Nations” – also up from 38% last year. Our findings are reinforced by a recent Pew [poll](#) that found 57% of Americans have a favorable view of the U.N., up from 52% a year ago – much higher than the approval ratings of [President](#) Donald Trump and the U.S. [Congress](#).

Q. In your opinion what is the best way for the U.S. to defend human rights globally? (Among those who said that defending human rights globally should be a goal of American foreign policy)



Source: University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll with SSRS, July 29 – August 7, 2025, among a sample of 1,514 respondents, with a MoE of +/- 2.9%.

As on many issues facing Americans, public opinion is in one place while government policy is in another. Still, there is often a large gap between Democrats and Republicans on most issues. As the UNGA meets this month with perhaps the least friendly US administration ever toward the existing global order, it is notable that not only are Americans increasingly favoring defending human rights and working with international organizations to accomplish the task, but also that the typically large partisan gap is much narrower on these issues.

I am grateful to Karenna Sarney and Taib Biygautane for their assistance with the data analysis.