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Congressional Review of U.S. Membership in the WTO

The United States was a key architect of the multilateral trading system, as a founding member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947 and its successor, the [World Trade Organization \(WTO\)](#) in 1995. The United States, many European countries, and other market economies led the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations, which resulted in the establishment of the WTO and several trade agreements that built on GATT commitments. The WTO currently has 166 members, including the United States. More than 60% of U.S. goods and services trade is with countries that do not have a free trade agreement (FTA) with the United States; this trade relies solely on the rules and terms of trade set by the WTO.

Many experts credit the WTO with helping to lower trade barriers globally, support economic growth, and manage trade frictions. At the same time, the institution faces challenges, which have become particularly salient since 2001. Some WTO members and experts contend that the WTO is losing relevance due to members' inability to reach consensus and negotiate a new round of major trade liberalization and rules since 1994. Countries instead have been resorting to [unilateral trade measures](#) that some allege violate the letter and spirit of WTO rules and have strained the global trading system. Further, trade frictions have heightened at a time when the WTO dispute settlement (DS) process is no longer fully functioning. WTO members continue to negotiate on key issues and debate reforms in attempts to improve and safeguard the organization.

Congress has recognized the WTO as the “foundation of the global trading system” in statute (P.L. 114-26). Congress enacted the 1994 Uruguay Round Agreements Act (URAA, P.L. 103-465) to approve and implement the agreement establishing the WTO and several trade agreements covering agricultural trade, services, investment measures, and intellectual property (IP). The URAA permits periodic congressional review of U.S. participation in the WTO and sets procedures for consideration of a privileged joint resolution to withdraw congressional approval of the WTO agreements (i.e., a disapproval resolution). If the 119th Congress chooses to invoke URAA procedures in 2025, Members may examine the merits and demerits of U.S. membership in the WTO. This In Focus provides an overview of the URAA legislative procedure, congressional activity, and WTO debates and issues facing Congress.

Legislative Procedure under URAA §125

Since 1995, Section 125 of the URAA has allowed any Member to introduce every five years a privileged joint resolution proposing to withdraw approval of the WTO agreements. The House Ways and Means Committee explained in H.Rept. 103-826 that §125 was to

provide an opportunity for Congress to evaluate the transition of the GATT to the WTO and to assess periodically whether continued membership in this organization is in the best interest of the United States. It is the desire of the Committee not to leave this decision totally in the hands of the Executive Branch but to be active in determining whether the WTO is an effective organization....

Ahead of such joint resolutions, URAA §§124-125 requires that the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) submit a report to Congress analyzing the “effects of the WTO Agreement on the interests of the United States, the costs and benefits to the United States of its participation in the WTO, and the value of the continued participation of the United States.”

House and Senate consideration of a disapproval resolution is governed by expedited parliamentary procedures contained in §125 of the URAA and §152 of the [Trade Act of 1974](#). These procedures are designed to ensure that Congress can choose to pass the joint resolution and present it to the President before the end of a 90-day period that began on the day Congress received the USTR report.

Joint resolutions can be submitted in either chamber at any time during the 90-day period and are referred to the House Ways and Means or Senate Finance Committees. A committee must report the referred measure by the close of the 45th day after introduction or be automatically discharged of its further consideration. Resolutions may be called up on the floor of each chamber by non-debatable motion (two legislative days' notice required in the House). A joint resolution is debatable for up to 20 hours and is unamendable. A motion to recommit is not permitted. In the case of a presidential veto, an override must occur by the later of the end of the 90-day period or by the close of a 15-day period that begins when Congress receives the veto message. The time periods exclude periods of adjournment taken by concurrent resolution and weekends when either chamber is not in session. In the Senate, the non-debatable motion to take up a resolution, coupled with the limits on amendment and debate, mean that a numerical majority in that chamber could take up and agree to a joint resolution without a cloture process and its supermajority requirement.

These provisions are considered to be rules of the House and Senate, respectively, and can be altered or overridden by a special rule in the House, suspension of the rules, or unanimous consent.

Congressional Activity

This year, Congress formally received the URAA-mandated USTR [report](#) on March 21, 2025. A WTO disapproval resolution (H.J.Res 93) was introduced in the House on April 10. Members last voted on such resolutions in the

House in 2000 and 2005 (**Table 1**). Both resolutions were reported adversely by House Ways and Means and defeated by relatively large margins. Disapproval resolutions were introduced in both chambers in 2020, but the measures received no action. In April 2020, the House adopted a [special rule](#) nullifying the expedited procedures providing for House consideration of a joint resolution under the URAA for the remainder of the 116th Congress.

Table 1. U.S. WTO Membership: Legislation & Votes

| Cong. | Bill | Final Votes | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| | | House | Senate |
| 103 rd | URAA | 288-146 | 76-24 |
| | P.L. 103-465 (H.R. 5110) | (Passed) 11/29/1994 | (Passed) 12/01/1994 |
| 119 th | Disapproval Res. H.J.Res 93 | * | — |
| 116 th | Disapproval Res. S.J.Res. 71 | — | no votes taken |
| 116 th | Disapproval Res. H.J.Res. 89 | no votes taken | — |
| 109 th | Disapproval Res. H.J.Res. 27 | 86-338 (Failed) 06/09/2005 | n/a |
| 106 th | Disapproval Res. H.J.Res. 90 | 56-363 (Failed) 06/21/2000 | n/a |
| 106 th | Disapproval Res. H.J.Res. 89 | no votes taken | — |

Source: CRS compiled from Congress.gov; see CRS Report R45846.

Notes: Disapproval Res. are resolutions withdrawing the approval of the United States from the Agreement establishing the WTO.

* Measures in the current Congress, still under consideration.

Enactment of Joint Resolution

Some question how the joint resolution, should it pass, is to be implemented. URAA §125 does not contain a specific provision on implementation, nor does it direct the executive branch to transmit notice of withdrawal to the WTO. According to H.Rept. 106-672 to accompany H.J.Res 90, while enacting a joint resolution under §125, “would call into question the future of U.S. participation in the WTO, it does not expressly provide for the President to withdraw from the WTO. Nor would the resolution put the United States in violation of its WTO obligations.” [Article XV of the WTO Agreement](#), which governs withdrawal procedures, specifies that a WTO member is to submit a written notice of withdrawal to the WTO Director-General, which would take effect six months after the date of receipt.

USTR March 2025 Report Findings

USTR’s 2025 [report](#) asserted that “the viability and durability of the WTO is increasingly in question.” The report highlighted issues of longstanding U.S. concern, including what USTR describes as the WTO’s inability to address challenges posed by China’s state-led, non-market economic practices; continued “carveouts” from WTO rules for developing countries; and DS panel decisions based on “erroneous interpretations” that undermine the sovereignty of the United States. USTR emphasized that “fundamental reform” of the WTO DS system is needed to maintain U.S.

participation. Concerns over shortcomings of the system led the U.S. government to block all Appellate Body judge appointments, leaving the body unable to hear appeals of dispute panel decisions as of December 2019. The report affirmed continued engagement in the WTO, stating that “the United States has tried—and will continue to try—to solve these problems,” but that U.S. “patience wears thin.”

WTO Debates and Issues Facing Congress

Some Members of Congress have expressed support for the WTO and also have echoed concerns raised by successive U.S. Administrations. In a [Ways and Means Committee hearing in March 2024](#), several Members expressed their priorities for WTO reforms and for advancing U.S. interests in ongoing trade negotiations at the WTO. Some Members have introduced bills calling for the United States to lead WTO reform efforts (118th Cong., S.Res. 202), revoke permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) that the United States granted to China upon its accession to the WTO in 2001 (119th Cong., H.R. 1504), and pursue sector-specific plurilateral agreements within the WTO framework (118th Cong., S. 446). If the 119th Congress chooses to debate and vote on H.J.Res 93 it may consider the potential benefits and costs of WTO participation.

At least one Member supporting withdrawal [portrayed](#) the WTO as “a deeply flawed globalist institution” that has “failed to uphold fair trade and undermined American economic interests.” Some Members [have accused](#) the WTO of “allowing” China to “skirt the rules” and take advantage of the United States, and of DS rulings that “systematically disfavored the United States.” They claim that relieving the United States from its WTO obligations would restore national sovereignty. WTO withdrawal would arguably give the United States more latitude to favor domestic firms over foreign firms and to impose additional unilateral trade measures, including [tariffs beyond most-favored nation \(MFN\) rates](#), without the need to justify its measures if challenged under WTO DS.

Opponents of WTO withdrawal maintain it would enable the remaining 165 WTO members to suspend trade concessions to the United States as well as ignore [core principles of non-discrimination](#). For example, countries may raise tariffs beyond maximum rates agreed to in the WTO and apply different agricultural and technical standards that potentially disadvantage U.S. products and services. U.S. firms would also no longer benefit from IP rights and protections negotiated through the WTO. Supporters of WTO membership have emphasized that if the United States were to withdraw, remaining members would [continue to benefit](#) from preferential trade terms among themselves, while the United States could face disadvantages, particularly in key markets without U.S. FTAs such as China and the EU. In an [April 2025 letter](#) to Congress, several agricultural industry groups emphasized the importance of WTO membership for ensuring market access for U.S. agricultural exports. Some Members have [asserted](#) that withdrawal from WTO commitments could undermine U.S. leadership in shaping global trading system norms and rules, and allow others to assume a greater role.

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