

Scientific achievements less prominent than a decade ago

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A new report by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press finds that overwhelming majorities of Americans believe that science has had a positive effect on society and that science has made life easier for most people. The public - even those skeptical of some scientific conclusions on such topics as climate change and evolution - rates scientists highly and believes government investments in science pay off in the long term.

But the study, conducted in collaboration with the American Association for the Advancement of [Science](#) (AAAS), also finds that the public has a far less positive view of the global standing of U.S. science than do scientists themselves. As the 40th anniversary of the moon landing approaches, just 17% say U.S. scientific achievements rate as the best in the world, compared with nearly half (49%) of scientists who hold that view.

This broad-ranging report is based on three separate surveys. Key findings include:

Science Slips as Nation's Greatest Achievement. Significantly fewer Americans volunteer scientific advances as one of the country's most important achievements than did so a decade ago (27% today, 47% in May 1999). Then, 18% cited space exploration and the moon landing as the country's top achievement in the 20th century; now, 12% see it as the greatest achievement in the past 50 years.

Public, Scientists Agree on Government Role in Funding Research.

Fully 84% of scientists name government as a top source of research funding in their specialty. Large majorities of the public think that government investments in basic scientific research (73%) and engineering and technology (74%) pay off in the long run, and 60% says that government investment in research is essential for scientific progress. Majorities of both Democrats (80%) and Republicans (68%) say that government investments in basic science pay off in the long term.

But Substantial Gaps Exist on Evolution and Climate Change. Most notably, 87% of scientists - but just 32% of Americans in general - say that humans and other living things have evolved over time and that evolution is the result of natural processes such as natural selection. A large gap also exists on the issue of climate change; 84% of scientists - but just 49% of the public - say that the earth is getting warmer because of human activity.

Politics and Science. Majorities of both the public and the scientists say that it is appropriate for scientists to take part in political debates about issues such as nuclear power and stem cell research. But they differ in their views on many of these issues. Scientists are much more likely than the public to support the expansion of nuclear power, federal funding of stem cell research and the use of animals in research. One recent political controversy - charges that the Bush administration censored government scientists - was largely invisible to the public, as 54% said they heard nothing about it. On the other hand, most scientists (55%) say they had heard a lot about it, and 77% believe that the charges are true.

Scientists Highly Regarded, Even By Those Skeptical of Scientific Conclusions. Scientists are very highly rated compared with members of other professions; only members of the military and teachers are more likely to be viewed as contributing a lot to society's well-being. More

than two-thirds (67%) of those who say science conflicts with their religious beliefs still say that scientists contribute a lot to the well-being of society. A similar proportion (63%) of those who accept a creationist view on the origins of life say scientists have contributed a great deal to society, compared with 78% who accept the theory of evolution.

Scientists Fault Public, Media. Fully 85% of scientists see the public's lack of scientific knowledge as a major problem for science, and about three-quarters (76%) say a major problem for science is that news reports fail to distinguish between findings that are well-founded and those that are not.

But Overall, Scientists Are Upbeat about the State of Their Profession. About three-quarters (76%) say this is generally a good time for science and nearly as many (73%) say it is good time for their scientific specialty. Despite the country's economic problems, 67% say it is a good time to begin a career in their scientific field.

The Public's "Science IQ." Americans are knowledgeable about basic scientific facts that affect their health and their daily lives, but they are less able to answer questions about other science topics. For example, 91% know that aspirin is an over-the-counter drug recommended to prevent heart attacks - but fewer than half (46%) know that electrons are smaller than atoms. The report is accompanied by a web version of the quiz administered to the survey's respondents.

Survey Details. The main telephone survey was conducted with a sample of 2,001 adults April 28-May 12, 2009; a science knowledge survey was conducted June 18-21, 2009 with a sample of 1,005 adults. Both were conducted by landlines and cell phones. A survey of scientists was conducted online with a random sample of 2,533 members of the AAAS, the world's largest scientific society, from May 1 to June 14, 2009.

More information: Online Science Quiz: Are you more science-savvy than the average American? Take the Pew Research Center online quiz and find out. Log onto pewresearch.org/sciencequiz/

Source: American Association for the Advancement of Science

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