

Study: Conservatives' trust in science has fallen dramatically since mid-1970s

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While trust in science remained stable among people who self-identified as moderates and liberals in the United States between 1974 and 2010, trust in science fell among self-identified conservatives by more than 25 percent during the same period, according to new research from Gordon Gauchat, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research.

"You can see this distrust in [science](#) among conservatives reflected in the current Republican primary campaign," said Gauchat, whose study appears in the April issue of the [American Sociological Review](#). "When people want to define themselves as conservatives relative to moderates and [liberals](#), you often hear them raising questions about the validity of [global warming](#) and evolution and talking about how 'intellectual elites' and [scientists](#) don't necessarily have the whole truth."

Relying on data from the 1974-2010 waves of the nationally representative [General Social Survey](#), the study found that people who self-identified as conservatives began the period with the highest trust in science, relative to self-identified moderates and liberals, and ended the period with the lowest.

In addition to examining how the relationship between [political ideology](#) and trust in science changed over almost 40 years, Gauchat also explored how other social and [demographic characteristics](#)—including frequency of church attendance—related to trust in science over that same period. Gauchat found that, while trust in science declined between 1974 and

2010 among those who frequently attended church, there was no statistically significant group-specific change in trust in science over that period among any of the other social or demographic factors he examined, including gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

"This study shows that the public trust in science has not declined since the mid-1970s except among self-identified conservatives and among those who frequently attend church," Gauchat said. "It also provides evidence that, in the United States, there is a tension between religion and science in some contexts. This tension is evident in public controversies such as that over the teaching of evolution."

As for why self-identified conservatives were much less likely to trust science in 2010 than they were in the mid-1970s, Gauchat offered several possibilities. One is the conservative movement itself.

"Over the last several decades, there's been an effort among those who define themselves as conservatives to clearly identify what it means to be a conservative," Gauchat said. "For whatever reason, this appears to involve opposing science and universities and what is perceived as the 'liberal culture.' So, self-identified conservatives seem to lump these groups together and rally around the notion that what makes 'us' conservatives is that we don't agree with 'them.'"

Another possibility, according to Gauchat, is the changing role of science in the United States. "In the past, the scientific community was viewed as concerned primarily with macro structural matters such as winning the space race," Gauchat said. "Today, conservatives perceive the scientific community as more focused on regulatory matters such as stopping industry from producing too much carbon dioxide.

Conservatives often oppose government regulation, and they increasingly perceive science as on the side of regulation, especially as scientific evidence is used more frequently in the work of government agencies

such as the Environmental Protection Agency and in public debates over issues such as climate change."

The study also found that the declining trust in science among conservatives was not attributable to changes among less educated conservatives, but rather to rising [distrust](#) among better educated conservatives. "It is a significant finding and the opposite of what many might expect," Gauchat said.

As for the study's implications, Gauchat said it raises important questions about the future role of science in public policy. "In a political climate in which all sides do not share a basic [trust](#) in science, scientific evidence no longer is viewed as a politically neutral factor in judging whether a public policy is good or bad," said Gauchat, who is also concerned that the increasingly politicized view of science could turn people away from careers in the field. "I think this would be very detrimental to an advanced economy where you need people with science and engineering backgrounds."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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