

Public may be more accepting of advocacy by climate scientists than previously thought

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Research published today in *Environmental Communication* suggests that scientists may have more freedom than previously thought to engage in certain forms of climate change advocacy without risking harm to their credibility.

The experiment, conducted by researchers at George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communication, showed that on five out of six occasions when a fictional scientist made advocacy statements to the [public](#) on Facebook, their own and their colleagues credibility was left unharmed.

The example statements, tested on a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, covered a broad spectrum of potential public engagement activities, including a recent scientific finding, a discussion of the risks and impacts of [climate change](#), pros and cons of different proposals to address climate change, a broad call for action on climate change, and two different statements where the scientist endorsed a specific action - limiting [carbon dioxide emissions](#) from coal-burning power plants or building more nuclear [power plants](#).

The only instance where the credibility of the scientist suffered was after the endorsement of a specific controversial policy - building more [nuclear power plants](#). This suggests that the American public are more likely to object to a scientist's advocacy statement when a specific standpoint is endorsed, and not when more general statements are made.

It has previously been thought that public advocacy on issues such as climate change can compromise the credibility of both individual scientists and the broader scientific community. However, this study suggests that scientists have the ability to communicate with the public without the risk of harming their reputation.

"This study certainly won't end debate about how scientists can best contribute to public discussions about climate change," said lead author John Kotcher, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at George Mason University. "However, we hope that our findings at least help stimulate a more evidence-based conversation among scientists about the relationship between scientific advocacy and [credibility](#), rather than simply relying upon intuition or anecdote to choose which role is best for them."

In a commentary that accompanied the study, scientist Simon Donner, from the University of British Columbia, welcomed the findings, but also said that it should "not be mistaken as a green light for scientists to publicly say or do anything without thought about the repercussions for themselves, the scientific community and the audience."

More information: John E. Kotcher et al, Does Engagement in Advocacy Hurt the Credibility of Scientists? Results from a Randomized National Survey Experiment, *Environmental Communication* (2017).
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Provided by Taylor & Francis

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