

# Scientists' political donations reflect polarization in academia—with implications for the public's trust in science

June 6 2023, by Alexander Kaurov

## Who donates to Republican causes?

The percentage of political donations in the U.S. going to Republican candidates and organizations has been trending somewhat downward. But college and university employees of any kind are much less likely to donate to a Republican than the population overall, and professors are even less likely to do so. By 2016, under 10% of political donations from professors were going to Republican causes.

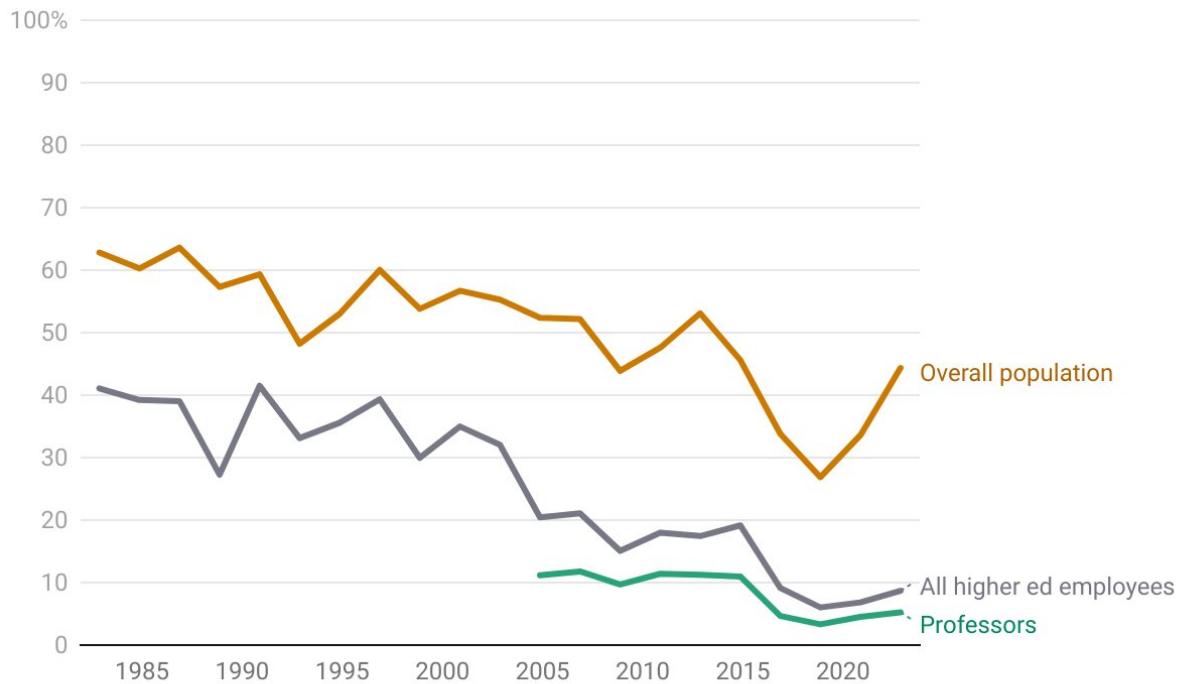


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: Kaurov et al. 2022 • Created with Datawrapper

People who lean left politically reported an [increase in trust in scientists](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic, while those who lean right politically reported much lower levels of trust in scientists. This polarization around scientific issues—from COVID-19 to climate change to evolution—is at its peak since surveys started tracking this question over 50 years ago.

Surveys reveal that people with more education are [more ideologically liberal](#). And [academia](#) has been gradually turning left over the past 40 years. Scientists—the people who produce [scientific knowledge](#)—are widely perceived to be on the opposite side of the political spectrum from those who trust science the least. This disparity poses a challenge when communicating important science to the public.

In a recent study, science historian [Naomi Oreskes](#), environmental social scientist [Viktoria Cologna](#), literary critic [Charlie Tyson and I](#) leveraged public data sets [to explore the dynamics of scientists' political leanings](#). Our analysis of individual political donations confirms that the vast majority of scientists who contribute have supported Democratic candidates. But we contend that this fact doesn't need to short-circuit effective science communication to the public.

## **Digging into individuals' political donations**

In the United States, all donations to [political parties](#) and campaigns must be reported to the Federal Election Committee. That information is [published by the FEC on its website](#), along with the donation amount and date; the donor's name, address and occupation; and the recipient's party affiliation. This data allowed us to examine millions of transactions made in the past 40 years.

[In our study](#), we examined researchers in academia, specifically people with titles like "professor," "faculty," "scientist" and "lecturer," as well as scientists in the energy sector. We conducted this analysis by identifying

100,000 scientists based on their self-reported occupation and cross-referencing them with the [Elsevier's Scopus database](#), which contains information on researchers and their scientific publications. The findings of our study indicate a gradual shift away from the Republican Party among American researchers, both in academia and the industry.

### Energy-sector employees are polarized by job

Fraction of donations going to Republicans from all individuals employed by a top 10 energy-sector company. The proportion of managers and executives who donate to Republican causes is much higher than the proportion of scientists employed in the energy sector who do the same.

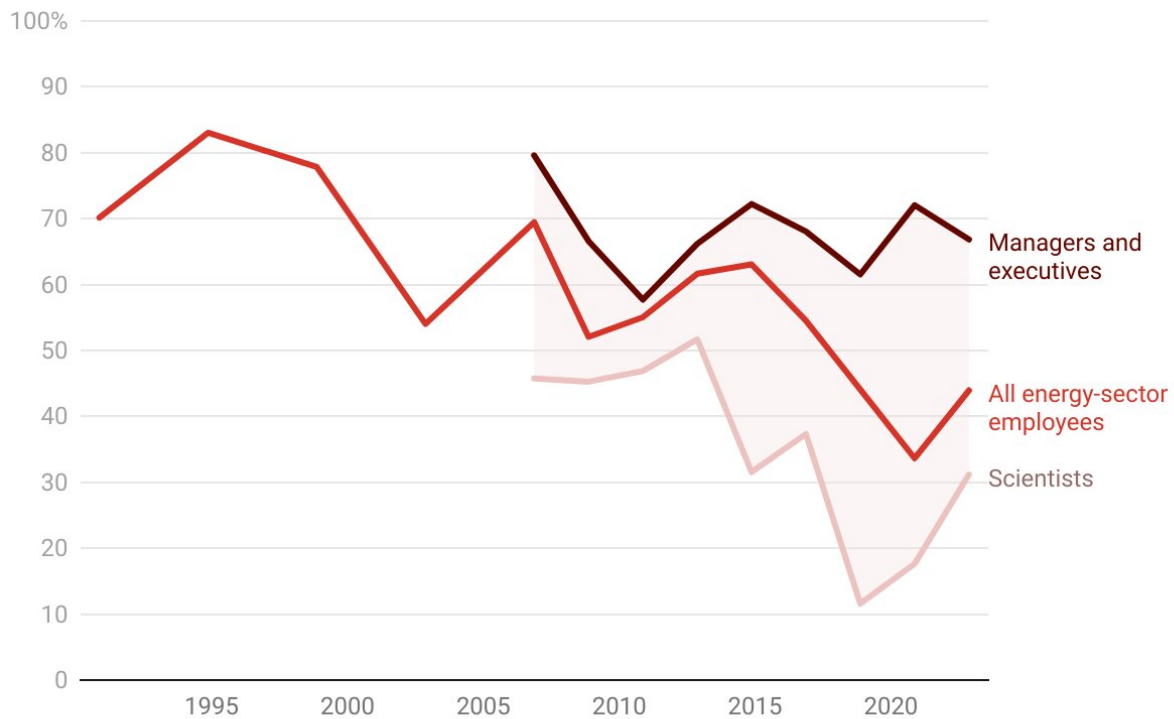


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: Kaurov et al 2022 • Created with Datawrapper

Overall support of the Republican Party, in terms of individual donations from the general public, has slid down over the past 40 years. But this trend is much steeper for scientists and academics than for the overall U.S. population. By 2022, it was hard to find an academic supporting the Republican Party financially, even at [Christian colleges and universities](#). The trend also persists [across academic disciplines](#).

Notably, scientists working at fossil fuel companies have also become more liberal, while their management has remained conservative, based on both groups' political donations. We suspect this buildup of political polarization within companies may at some point intensify the public conversation about [climate change](#).

## Who shares science messages

People tend to accept and internalize information delivered by someone they consider trustworthy. Communication scholars call this the "[trusted messenger](#)" effect. Various factors like socioeconomic status, race and, increasingly, [political leanings](#) influence this perceived credibility.

Science communication gets stalled because of what appears to be a positive feedback loop: The more liberal academia gets, the fewer "trusted messengers" can communicate with the half of the U.S. that leans right. Trust in science and scientific institutions among Republicans declines and it gets reflected in their policies; academia, in response, leans even more left.

The increased clustering of scientists away from Republicans risks further damaging conservative Republicans' trust in [science](#). But we contend there are ways to break out of this loop.

## Who has high confidence in the scientific community?

By 2010, a larger fraction of the people who identified as Democrats expressed a 'great deal' of confidence in science than did the fraction of people who identified as Republicans. This divide in the U.S. has continued to widen, largely because of an increase in Democrats' confidence.

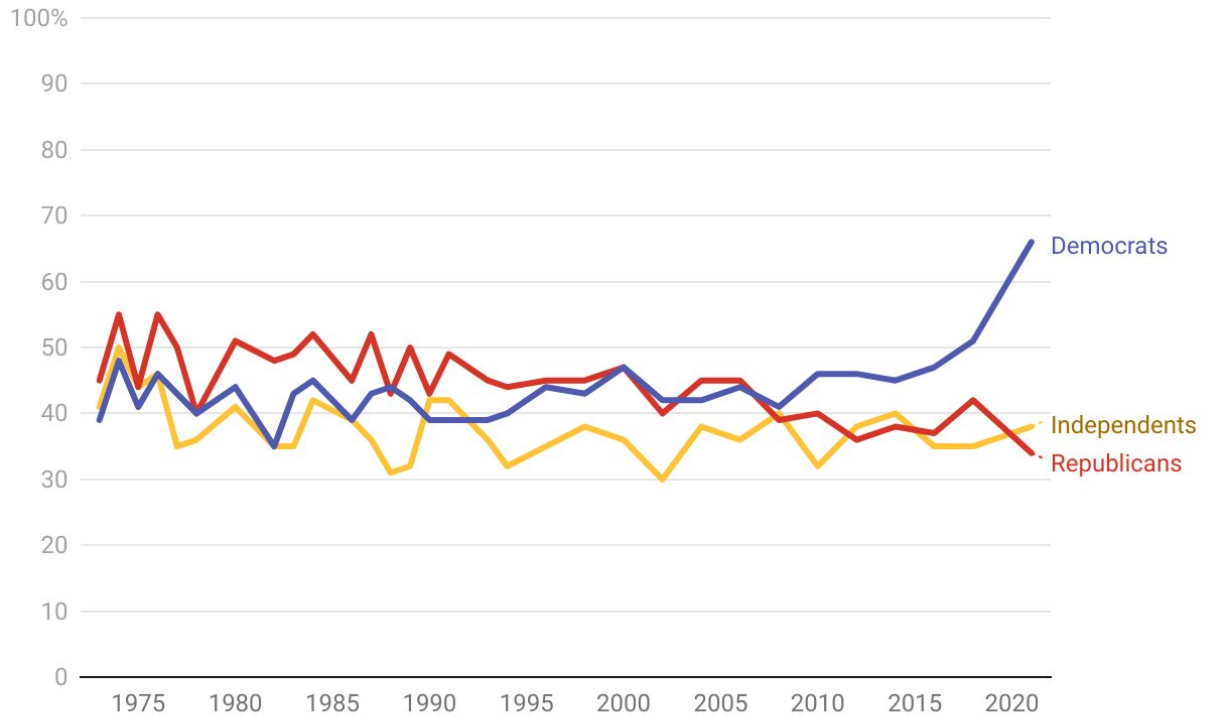


Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: General Social Survey • Created with Datawrapper

First, academia is not a monolith. While our study may suggest that all academics are liberal, it is important to admit that the data we analyzed—political donations—is only a proxy for what people actually think. We don't capture every scientist with this method since not everyone donates to political campaigns. In fact, [most people don't donate to any candidate at all.](#)

[According to surveys](#), many academics have traditionally considered themselves moderate. The question, then, is how to communicate to the public the diversity of political views in academia, given the degree of current polarization, and how to elevate these other voices.

Second, the evident left leaning of academia [is not necessarily proof of a "liberal bias"](#) that [some people worry is corrupting research](#) and [impeding the pursuit of truth](#). Overall, [higher education](#) does appear to have a [liberalizing effect on social and political views](#), but universities also play an important role in the formation of [political identity for young conservatives](#).

We believe that clear data about academia's left-leaning orientation, as well as understanding the underlying reasons for it, could help interrupt the feedback loop of declining scientific trust.

For now there's a shortage of centrist and conservative scientists serving as trusted messengers. By engaging in public conversation, these scientists could offer visible alternatives to the anti-scientific stances of Republican elites, while at the same time showing that the scientific world is not homogeneous.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Scientists' political donations reflect polarization in academia—with implications for the public's trust in science (2023, June 6) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-scientists-political-donations-polarization-academiawith.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.