

Science activism is surging, which marks a culture shift among scientists

July 7 2023, by Scott Frickel and Fernando Tormos-Aponte

Should scientists be politically active as part of the job?

Responses to "how often should scientists be politically active in their professional activities?" from a survey of over 2,200 scientists belonging to the Union of Concerned Scientists Science Network.



Credit: The Conversation

[Hundreds of scientists protested](#) government efforts to restrict educational access to Western science theories, including Darwin's theory of evolution, in June 2023 in India. Similarly, scientists in Mexico participated in a [research strike](#) in May 2023 to protest a national law they claimed would threaten the conditions for basic research. And during the same month in Norway, [three scientists were arrested](#) for protesting the nation's slow-moving climate policy.

As these among many other actions show, scientists today are speaking out on a variety of political and [social issues](#) related to their own

research fields and in solidarity with other [social movements](#).

We are [social scientists](#) who [study the relationship](#) between science and society. Through our work, we've noticed more scientists seem empowered to advocate for a wide range of policy issues. We're interested in how the surge in science activism may be changing the norms of scientific research.

[With colleagues](#), we recently reviewed and summarized a [growing body of studies](#) examining how scientists are mobilizing for [social activism](#) and political protest. [We also surveyed](#) 2,208 members of the Union of Concerned Scientists Science Network to learn more about scientists' political engagement. Here is what we have found so far.

A new wave of science activism

[Science activism has long been considered taboo](#), as many in the field fear that politicizing science undermines its objectivity. Even so, scientist-activists have still managed to shape the U.S. political landscape throughout history. Over the past century, for example, scientists have protested [the atomic bomb](#), [pesticides](#), [wars in Southeast Asia](#), [genetic engineering](#) and the federal response to the [AIDS epidemic](#).

More recently, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 triggered a wave of [political mobilization](#) not seen in the United States since the [Vietnam War era](#). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change activism, Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement, [scientists have also mobilized](#), and [science advocacy organizations](#) are playing important roles.

Some groups, like [March for Science](#) and [Scientist Rebellion](#), are new and claim dozens of chapters and thousands of members around the world. In addition, older organizations like [the Union of Concerned](#)

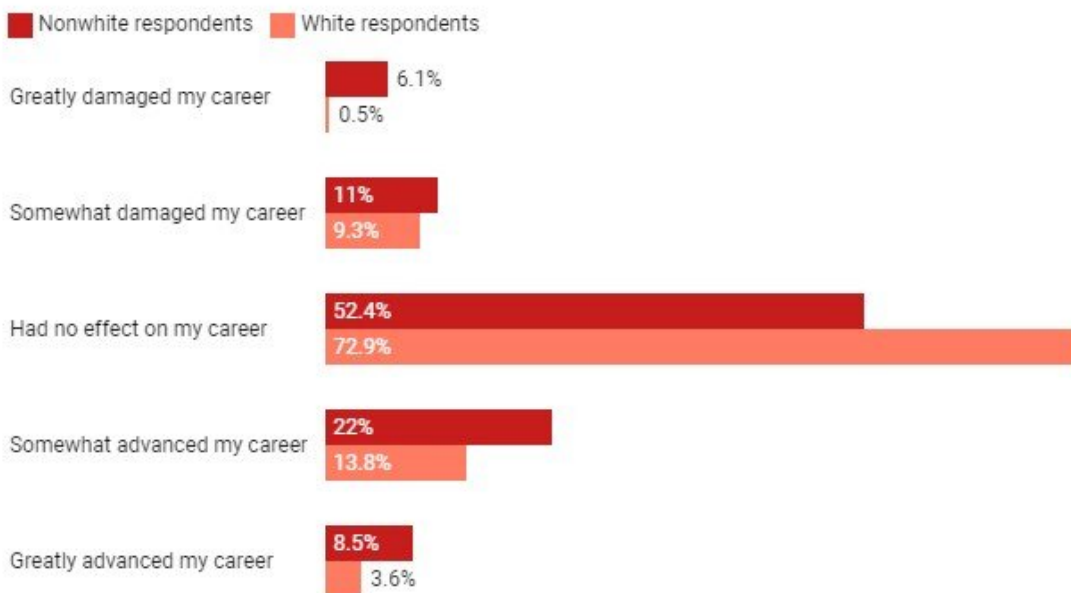
[Scientists](#) are growing, while once-defunct organizations like [Science for the People](#) have reemerged.

Science organizing also happens within universities, graduate student unions and professional associations. These groups use their [connections to local communities](#) and larger networks of science professionals to mobilize others in the scientific community.

Many science advocacy groups borrow protest tactics from previous eras, like mass marches and teach-ins. Others are more innovative, including "[die-ins](#)" at medical schools to protest police racial violence and [data-rescue "hackathons"](#) to protect public access to government data.

How has advocacy affected scientists' careers?

Responses to "if you have been involved in science-related advocacy, how has it affected your career?" from a survey of over 2,200 scientists belonging to the Union of Concerned Scientists Science Network.



Credit: The Conversation

Some efforts mirror conventional forms of politics, like [314 Action](#), an organization that supports political candidates with STEM backgrounds. Others are more confrontational, such as Scientist Rebellion, some members of which [blocked roads and bridges](#) to demand action on the climate emergency.

Or, science advocacy can look indistinguishable from typical academic practices, like teaching. A new course taught by an MIT physics professor titled "[Scientist Activism: Gender, Race and Power](#)" helps raise student awareness about the political nature of science.

Professional norms may be shifting

We'll need more research to determine how the resurgence of scientist activism is influencing politics and policy. But we can already point to some effects—the growth of science advocacy organizations, increased [media attention](#) to scientist activism, climate-friendly [changes in investment policies](#) at some universities, and [more STEM-trained politicians](#). However, we also expect that impending crises, like climate change, may be driving acceptance of activism within the scientific community.

For example, when we asked scientists how often they should be politically active, 95% of our surveyed scientists answered "sometimes," "most of the time," or "always." Our surveyed population is, by definition, politically engaged. But this near-uniform level of support for political action suggests that the professional norms that have long sanctioned scientist activism may be shifting.

Other findings from the survey strengthen this interpretation. Scientist activism often entails some level of personal or [professional risk](#). But

75% of respondents told us their science-based advocacy had the support of their employers. Most surprisingly for us, respondents were twice as likely to report that activism helped to advance their careers—22%—rather than damage them—11%.

Our survey did find, however, that nonwhite scientists are more vulnerable to the risks of engaging in science advocacy. Seventeen percent of nonwhite scientists report negative career repercussions from their science advocacy, compared with less than 10% among white scientists. Yet compared with white respondents, nonwhite respondents are also more likely to engage in science advocacy.

While nonwhite respondents report higher rates of negative career impacts, the percentage reporting higher rates of career advancement from advocacy—31%—was nearly double that for white respondents—18%. This difference suggests that science advocacy has deeper career consequences—both good and bad—among nonwhite scientists. Although they are more likely to be rewarded for this activity, they are exposed to greater risk for doing so.

Emerging lessons

Two lessons emerge from our research thus far. First, our findings indicate that science activism may be gaining legitimacy within the scientific community. In this context, social media is helping mobilize and raise visibility among younger researchers. These researchers' political experiences are informed by the climate justice, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements. As this newer generation of science activists moves into the profession, they will continue to shift the cultural norms of science.

Second, because race unevenly structures scientists' experiences with [activism](#), science activists can build on their current momentum by

[embracing intersectional solidarity](#). This means taking actions to center and engage marginalized groups within science. [Intersectional solidarity](#) can deepen activist engagement, enhance and diversify recruitment efforts, and increase its impact on social and ecological change.

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