

Where's the trust? US climate deniers have no faith in university researchers

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U.S. voters who don't trust universities are also more likely to believe that human activity doesn't cause climate change, a new collaborative study from researchers at the University of Cambridge and the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) revealed in *PLOS Climate*.

Based on a survey of thousands of U.S. voters, co-authors Cambridge Zero Fellow and Assistant Professor Ramit Debnath, Professor R.

Michael Alvarez and Mr. Danny Ebanks from Caltech, found that Americans who expressed negative and distrustful opinions about universities and academics were also the most likely to believe climate change is not caused by humans and is not a problem for the United States.

Despite increasing catastrophic weather events such as wildfires, flooding and news reports that hurricanes like Idalia have become wetter, windier and more intense because of rising [global temperatures](#), the study revealed that almost half of U.S. voters (45%) believe climate change isn't a problem at all, and 41% of voters believe that climate change is a natural phenomenon not caused by humans.

Professor Debnath said, "This lack of trust in [higher education](#) and evidence-based research makes the public more vulnerable to opinion-based arguments from powerful actors who disproportionately profit from climate denialism."

Among all the variables studied, such as age, gender, race, education and region, the most statistically significant factor in driving climate denialism was trust in institutions, the authors said. Young registered voters were most likely to trust institutions.

The co-authors said that this distrust in climate science is one of the challenges to the successful implementation of climate action policies, such as climate change taxes (carbon taxes), congestion charges and efforts to end sales of the most-polluting vehicles.

Professor Debnath said, "If voters don't believe in the proven outcomes of fundamental research, then how can politicians make the changes we need in the next decade to stop [climate change](#)?"

Additionally, the paper referenced a 2016 U.S. poll, in which 57% of

conservative Republicans were found to believe that climate research findings were influenced by scientists keen to advance their careers, while up to 22% of Americans declared they had no trust or not much trust in climate scientists.

In the paper, the authors included quotes from [climate scientists](#) whose growing frustrations with U.S. climate denialism and lack of trust in academic research led them to refer to a "broken society-science contract" in desperate need of repair.

They conclude the paper by urging universities and scientists to re-establish [public trust](#) with improved [science communication](#), providing [public education](#) that helps people to discern facts from opinion, improving the curriculum on understanding the scientific process at primary and [secondary schools](#) and persuading trusted religious leaders and influencers to pass on the proven facts of [climate science](#).

Professor Debnath said, "If science wants to move the dial on the climate crisis, then we need to get out of our ivory towers and make regaining the public's trust a key mission for every university."

More information: R. Michael Alvarez et al, Why don't Americans trust university researchers and why it matters for climate change, *PLOS Climate* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pclm.0000147](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pclm.0000147)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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