

Study finds American trust in scientific expertise survived polarization and previous administration's attack on science

March 8 2024



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A new analysis shows that trust in scientific expertise among the American public remained high during the last six decades and that the

Trump administration attacks on scientific expertise did not modify the basic confidence of Americans in science and scientific expertise.

The study, "[Citizen attitudes toward science and technology, 1957–2020: Measurement, stability, and the Trump challenge](#)," was published in the journal *Science and Public Policy*.

The Trump administration attacks on scientific experts—exemplified by the attacks on Anthony Fauci—increased the level of partisan polarization in the United States and made the question of scientific expertise more salient to many Americans. The proportion of adults who had no attitude about scientific expertise in 2016 dropped significantly during the four years of the Trump administration.

"The proportion of Americans with a low level of [trust](#) in scientific expertise rose from 3% in 2016 to 13% in 2020," said lead researcher Jon D. Miller of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. "But that increase was more than matched by a rise in the proportion of Americans with a high level of trust in scientific expertise, from 23% to 58%."

The views and actions of the Trump administration with regard to such topics as [climate change](#), [environmental protection](#), and the COVID-19 pandemic were widely condemned as a Republican war on science. But even among conservative Republicans, the proportion with a high level of trust in scientific expertise rose more between 2016 and 2020 than the proportion with a low level of trust.

"The pandemic provided people with a new compelling reason to be interested in science, or at least certain areas of it," explained co-author Robert T. Pennock, University Distinguished Professor and philosopher of science at Michigan State University. "Political polarization notwithstanding, overall trust in science tended to increase, reflecting the

fact that the [scientific community](#) is indeed deserving of trust."

The study's analysis of changes between 2016 and 2020 was conducted against a background of data from a series of national public opinion surveys starting in 1957. These surveys show that Americans consistently express a high degree of appreciation of the benefits of science and technology and a relatively low degree of apprehension about their dangers over the last six decades.

In 2016, interest in science and technology, college-level study of science and technology, and level of education were the strongest predictors of appreciation of the benefits of science and technology—with trust in scientific expertise running a close fourth. Fundamentalist religious belief was by far the strongest predictor of apprehension about the dangers of science and technology.

The situation was similar in 2020, except that civic scientific literacy became a stronger predictor of appreciation of the benefits of science and technology, suggesting that a basic level of scientific understanding enabled people who were previously uninterested in science and technology to come up to speed with regard to [current events](#), especially the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The Trump administration's contempt for scientific and technological expertise was rightly a cause for concern, but our study shows that the American public was by and large unaffected," Miller commented. "But it will be necessary to continue to improve the public's understanding of science and [technology](#) to ensure that it is equipped to weather any future storms."

More information: Jon D Miller et al, Citizen attitudes toward science and technology, 1957–2020: measurement, stability, and the Trump challenge, *Science and Public Policy* (2024). [DOI:](#)

[10.1093/scipol/scad086](https://phys.org/news/2024-03-american-scientific-expertise-survived-polarization.html)

Provided by Michigan State University

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