

Political posts on X could harm academics' credibility, new study finds

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New research, published in a [CESifo working paper](#) reveals that expressing political views on social media can erode public trust in academics. The paper is a collaboration from Dr. Eleonora Alabrese

from the University of Bath; Francesco Capozza, Research Associate at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and Prashant Garg, an Economics Ph.D. student at Imperial College Business School.

In an online experiment involving 1,700 people from the US, participants were shown vignettes featuring fake academic profiles with different political posts. They were then asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how credible they thought the academic and their research were, and their willingness to read an opinion piece written by the academic.

The results of the experiment revealed that academics who stay out of political debates are seen as the most trustworthy. The more polarized their views, the less credible they become. Academics with strong Republican views were rated 39% less credible than their neutral peers, while those with strong Democratic views were seen as 11% less credible than their neutral peers. People were also far less likely to engage with content from politically vocal academics, regardless of whether they leaned left or right.

The research team also surveyed 128 academics from around the world, asking them what they think about academics sharing their political views on [social media](#). The survey revealed that many are aware of the potential risks to their credibility when expressing political opinions but despite these concerns, some still choose to engage in these discussions, possibly seeking greater visibility and impact.

These findings are important for the public because they show that when academics share their political views on social media, it can make people trust them and their research less. If the public sees academics as less trustworthy, they might ignore important scientific information on issues like climate change or [public health](#).

Dr. Alabrese, co-author from the Department of Economics at the

University of Bath, commented, "Trust in science is key for making informed decisions and shaping good public policy. But with trust in scientific authority facing challenges, this study shows how crucial it is for academics to find the right balance between being visible and staying credible. Our findings suggest that [science communication](#) is inherently polarizing, so striking a balance in communication is essential, particularly when discussing topics outside one's area of expertise."

The research team also analyzed academics' social media timelines with AI. They found that 44% of the nearly 100,000 US academics examined between 2016 and 2022 engaged in political debates on X (then Twitter)—six times more than the average user (7%). Female academics (50%) were more likely to be politically active than their male counterparts (40%), and those in the humanities and social sciences were the most outspoken (58% and 65%, respectively).

Academics express views from diverse political camps on popular topics such as climate change and immigration. Issues like abortion, income redistribution, and racism are becoming more divisive within the scientific community. The researchers found academics are showing even more polarized views than general users on [racial issues](#), and this gap between academics and the public is widening.

The researchers recommend that academics carefully consider how they share their research online while also expressing their political opinions on social [media](#). The findings point out that when academics engage in political discussions online, it could erode the public's perception of their credibility, undermine public engagement with academic discussions and potentially exacerbate polarization with US society.

More information: Politicized Scientists: Credibility Cost of Political Expression on Twitter: [www.cesifo.org/en/publications ... political-expression](http://www.cesifo.org/en/publications...political-expression)

Provided by University of Bath

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