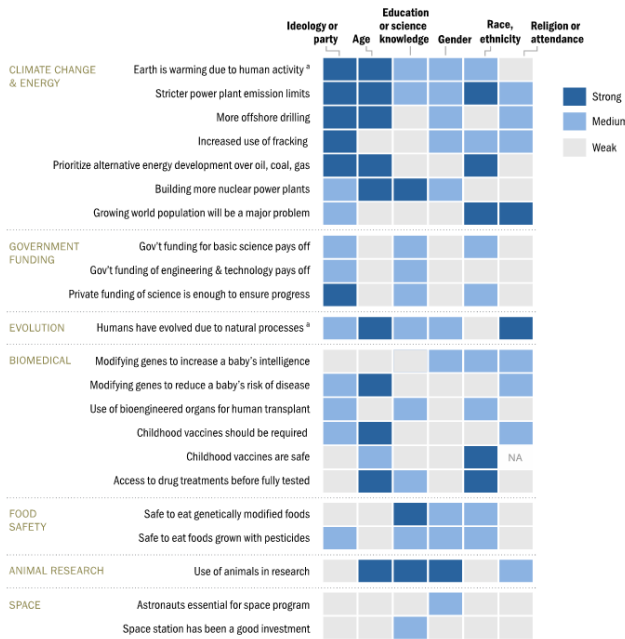


The public's political views are strongly linked to attitudes on environmental issues

1 July 2015

Wide Mix of Factors Influencing Public Views on 22 Science-Related Issues

Relative strength and statistical significance of each factor or set of factors



Sources: Survey of U.S. adults Aug. 15-25. Views on fracking from November 2014 survey. Views on prioritizing alternative energy sources from December 2014. Views on safety of childhood vaccines from February 2015 survey. Significance and relative size of factors are based on results of logistic regression analyses. ^aFactor strength for views on climate change and evolution are based on results from two models. NA indicates variable not available, not included in the model.

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The chart references the relative strength and statistical significance of each factor or set of factors examined in the report. Credit: Pew Research Center

Public attitudes about climate change and energy policy are strongly intertwined with political party affiliation and ideology. But politics play a more modest, or even peripheral, role on public views about other key issues related to biomedical science, food safety and space, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis.

The chart below highlights the wide mix of factors tied to [public attitudes](#) across a broad set of 22 [science](#) issues. It illustrates the strength of connection between [political affiliation](#) and opinion, and it shows issues for which other factors - such as [educational attainment](#), knowledge about

science, religious affiliation or demographic characteristics - are strongly tied to the public's views.

"In this politically polarized culture, there is a strong temptation to think that people's partisan connections and their ideology dominate their thinking about every civic issue," said Cary Funk, associate director for science research and lead author of the new Pew Research analysis. "What's striking about these findings is that politics sometimes is at the center of the story about public attitudes and sometimes politics has very little to do with the way people think about science issues in the public arena. We find there are striking differences that center on age, educational attainment, gender, and race and ethnicity."

The broad pattern is that climate and energy issues are highly politicized, whereas issues tied to biomedical science, food safety and space policy often are strongly tied to other, nonpolitical, factors. For example, 71% of Democrats and independents who lean to the Democratic Party say the Earth is warming due to human activity, compared with 27% of their Republican counterparts (a difference of 44 percentage points). The analysis uses statistical modeling that shows these differences hold, even when taking into account the differing characteristics of Democrats and Republicans, such as their different age and racial profiles.

There are a host of other science issues for which political factors either share influence with other traits or simply don't matter. For example, party and ideology are among several factors that influence public views about human evolution. Those other independent predictors of people's views include religious affiliation, age, level of education, specific science knowledge and gender. Furthermore, there are no differences between the major political party affiliation groups on views about the use of animals in research, the safety of eating genetically modified (GM) foods and whether to allow access

to experimental drug treatments before those treatments have been shown to be safe and effective.

Among other major findings:

There are large and persistent gaps tied to generational differences on climate and energy issues and occasionally on other topics, such as views about childhood vaccines.

There are substantial differences between younger and older Americans that are independent of their political beliefs, education levels or other factors.

- Seniors (31%) are less likely than those under age 30 (60%) to say the Earth is warming due to human activity, and are less inclined to favor stricter power plant emission limits in order to address [climate change](#). Older adults also express more support for offshore oil drilling, and they are more likely to prioritize fossil fuel development over alternative energy sources such as wind and solar power.
- 37% of adults under age 50 say parents should be able to decide not to vaccinate their children, compared with 22% of those ages 50 and older.
- When it comes to the idea of changing a baby's genetic characteristics in order to reduce the risk of serious diseases, older adults are more likely than younger ones to say this would be taking medical advances too far (56% among those ages 65 and older compared with 42% among those ages 18 to 29).

Education is especially linked to public views about the use of animals in research, the safety of eating genetically modified foods and nuclear power.

One widely discussed idea is that educational and science knowledge differences play a central role in the public's beliefs about science topics. On the [science issues](#) probed here, differences in views by education level are substantial on some topics. Specifically:

- 67% of those with postgraduate degrees

- favor the use of animals in scientific research, compared with 40% of those with a high school diploma or less schooling.
- A 57% majority of those with a postgraduate degree consider GM foods generally safe to eat. By contrast, 62% of those with a high school degree or less say that GM foods are generally unsafe.
- 54% of those holding a postgraduate degree favor building more nuclear power plants. By comparison 43% of those with some college and 42% of those with a high school degree or less favor building more nuclear power plants.

The Pew Research survey included a set of six science knowledge questions in order to evaluate whether people who know more about science, regardless of how much formal schooling they have had, hold different attitudes about science topics. Those with more science knowledge are more likely than those with less knowledge to say eating GM foods and eating foods grown with pesticides are safe. Those with more science knowledge are especially likely to see bioengineered artificial organs for human transplant as an appropriate use of medical advances (85% compared with 65% of those with less science knowledge).

There are gender gaps on a number of science-related topics, including animal research, [food safety](#), energy and space issues, even after controlling for political leanings and other factors.

For example:

- A 60% majority of men favor the use of animals in scientific research, while a 62% majority of women are opposed.
- A smaller share of women (28%) than men (47%) believe eating genetically modified foods is safe.
- Six-in-ten men favor allowing more offshore drilling, compared with 44% of women.
- Women (52%) are less inclined than are men (66%) to say astronauts are essential in the future of the U.S. space program.

Some science-related topics elicit wide differences of opinion across racial and ethnic groups.

For instance:

- African Americans are less supportive than either whites or Hispanics of allowing access to experimental drug treatments before such treatments have been shown to be safe and effective.
- Compared with either whites (36%) or Hispanics (34%), more African Americans (57%) take the view that the growing world population will not be a major problem because we will find ways to stretch our natural resources.
- Seven-in-ten Hispanics say the Earth is warming mostly because of human activity, compared with 44% among non-Hispanic whites.

Differences in [religious affiliation](#) and worship service attendance are central to the public's views on a handful of science topics; foremost among these are beliefs about human evolution. A follow-up report will go into more detail on religious groups' views about all of these topics.

The analysis in this report relies primarily on data from a Pew Research Center survey of the general public, using a probability-based sample of the adult population by landline and cellular telephone Aug. 15-25, 2014, with a representative sample of 2,002 adults nationwide. The margin of sampling error for results based on all adults is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points. This survey of the general public, along with a companion survey of members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), was conducted by the Pew Research Center in collaboration with the AAAS.

More information: These findings will be available at www.pewinternet.org/2015/07/01...-and-science-issues/

The updated interactive will be available at: www.pewinternet.org/interactiv...entists-opinion-gap/

Provided by Pew Research Center

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