

Americans' attitudes about science in 2017: High confidence, low visibility

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Scientists and the nation's scientific enterprise remain largely invisible to the public, according to national public opinion surveys commissioned by Research!America in 2017. Yet public perception of science is positive with a majority (67%) in agreement that public policies should be based on the best available science.

More than half of Americans agree that [scientists](#) should play a major role in shaping [public policy](#) in many areas, not only in medical and [health research](#), but also in education (58%), infrastructure (55%) and national defense (51%). The public overwhelmingly (82%) considers scientists trustworthy spokespersons for science, far above elected officials and the media. This level of trust includes an expectation that scientists will be the primary messengers for scientific issues, even those with policy implications. However, scientists remain essentially invisible. A very strong majority of Americans (81%) cannot name a living scientist, more than two-thirds (67%) cannot name an institution, company or organization where medical or health research is conducted, and less than a quarter (21%) know that medical research is conducted in all 50 states.

"The findings related to the visibility of scientists and the scientific community have been consistent over the past decade—woefully low—which indicates a need for stronger engagement between scientists and the public," said Mary Woolley, president and CEO, Research!America. "In order for science to have a more prominent position in our national agenda, the public and their policymakers must hear more from scientists about the health and economic benefits of public and private sector research."

Opinions were mixed (46% agree, 33% disagree and 22% not sure) about whether or not great strides in science and innovation will continue while Donald Trump is president. The responses were divided along party lines with more

Republicans (74%) than Independents (44%) and Democrats (22%) agreeing. Furthermore, a significant number of Americans (79%), including strong majorities across the political spectrum, agree that it is important for President Trump to assign a high priority to putting health research and innovation to work to assure continued medical progress (85% of Democrats, 79% of Republicans and 72% of Independents). A strong majority of Americans (71%) say they have confidence in scientific institutions compared to 46% for the Presidency and 31% for Congress. In 2018, all 435 seats in the House and 33 of 100 Senate seats will be up for election.

"Scientists must initiate productive conversations with candidates to connect the dots between research and finding solutions to health threats like Alzheimer's disease and the opioid epidemic," said Woolley.

A majority of Americans (60%) support increased funding for research to better understand and combat opioid addiction, and a plurality (45%) say prescription pain medication abuse and addiction is a major problem in their community. In a survey of West Virginians, respondents said the [opioid epidemic](#) is the most important [health](#) issue in the state, above obesity, cancer, chronic [obstructive pulmonary disease](#) (COPD) and dental disease.

Provided by Research!America

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