

Trust and Mistrust in Americans' Views of Scientific Experts, Cary Funk, Pew Research Center

In the middle of a prolonged political divide around science, energy, and the environment, it is a difficult time to be involved in science communication, though perhaps not as bleak as once thought.

Funk explained that public opinion tends to tilt positively when it comes to trusting scientists about their work, even showing growth since 2016. According to Pew Research Center, 35 percent of Americans have “strong confidence” in scientists, while only 13 percent have “not too much” or “no” confidence. But about half of the public (51%) has neither strongly positive nor strongly negative confidence in scientists. This suggests that majority opinion could move in either direction as people think about scientific domains and contexts.

When respondents self-reported that they knew more about what each of six groups of scientists do, they tended to respond more positively and trust scientists more overall. In contrast, knowing nothing about scientists was associated with little trust in them. That being said, the majority of respondents had a mostly positive view of environmental, medical and nutrition science researchers, though perceptions of trust were multi-faceted. People tend to trust scientists to care about the common good and to “do a good job.” However, they do not widely believe scientists act with transparency or suffer consequences for bad or unethical behavior. People trusted all three research groups of scientists that Pew Research Center listed less overall than their physician and dietician counterparts, which people were more likely to have personal experience with.

The public tends to trust researchers and their findings more when they’ve been reviewed by an independent committee and the data is available to the public. In addition, who funded the researchers matters. Trust decreases when science is funded by an industry group. However, science funded by the government is not commonly mistrusted, although more than a quarter of respondents suggested that government-funding may make them trust some results less.

Pew Research Center’s recent survey suggests that familiarity matters in trusting and valuing scientists and scientific research. The findings help inform science communicators’ work in making research and the researchers available to the public.