

# Conservatives' trust in science has declined sharply

**Since 1974, when conservatives had the highest trust in science, their confidence has dropped precipitously, an American Sociological Review study concludes.**

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As the Republican presidential race has shown, the conservatives who dominate the primaries are deeply skeptical of science — making Newt Gingrich, for one, regret he ever settled onto a couch with Nancy Pelosi to chat about global warming.

A study released Thursday in the American Sociological Review concludes that trust in science among conservatives and frequent churchgoers has declined precipitously since 1974, when a national survey first asked people how much confidence they had in the scientific community. At that time, conservatives had the highest level of trust in scientists.

Confidence in scientists has declined the most among the most educated conservatives, the peer-reviewed research paper found, concluding: "These results are quite profound because they imply that conservative discontent with science was not attributable to the uneducated but to rising distrust among educated conservatives."

"That's a surprising finding," said the report's author, Gordon Gauchat, in an interview. He has a doctorate in sociology and is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

To highlight the dramatic impact conservative views of science have had on public opinion, Gauchat pointed to results from Gallup, which found in 2012 that just 30% of conservatives believed the Earth was warming as a result of greenhouse gases versus 50% two years earlier. In contrast, the poll showed almost no change in the opinion of liberals, with 74% believing in global warming in 2010 versus 72% in 2008.

Gauchat suggested that the most educated conservatives are most acquainted with views that question the credibility of scientists and their conclusions. "I think those people are most fluent with the conservative ideology," he said. "They have stronger ideological dispositions than people who are less educated."

Chris Mooney, who wrote "The Republican War on Science," which Gauchat cites, agreed. "If you think of the reasons behind this as nature versus nurture, all this would be nurture, that it was the product of the conservative movement," he said. "I think

being educated is a proxy for people paying attention to politics, and when they do, they tune in to Fox News and blogs."

Gauchat also noted the conservative movement had expanded substantially in power and influence, particularly during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, creating an extensive apparatus of think tanks and media outlets. "There's a whole enterprise," he said.

Science has also increasingly come under fire, Gauchat said, because its cultural authority and its impact on government have grown. For years, he said, the role science played was mostly behind the scenes, creating better military equipment and sending rockets into space.

But with the emergence of the Environmental Protection Agency, for example, scientists began to play a crucial and visible role in developing regulations.

Jim DiPeso, policy director of Republicans for Environmental Protection, has been trying to move his party to the center on issues such as climate change, but he said many Republicans were wary of science because they believed it was "serving the agenda of the regulatory state."

"There has been more and more resistance to accepting scientific conclusions," he said. "There is concern about what those conclusions could lead to in terms of bigger government and more onerous regulation."

The study also found that Americans with moderate political views have long been the most distrustful of scientists, but that conservatives now are likely to outstrip them.

Moderates are typically less educated than either liberals or conservatives, Gauchat said. "These folks are just generally alienated from science," he said, describing them as the "least engaged and least knowledgeable about basic scientific facts."

The study was based on results from the General Social Survey, administered between 1974 and 2010 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Gauchat, who has been studying public attitudes toward science for about eight years, has applied for a National Science Foundation grant to investigate why trust in science has waned. He plans to ask a battery of questions, including some focused on scientific controversies, such as those over vaccines and genetically modified foods, to try to understand what makes conservatives and moderates so distrustful.

"It's not one simple thing," he said.

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