

AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES



PERCEPTIONS OF SCIENCE IN AMERICA

A REPORT FROM
THE PUBLIC FACE OF SCIENCE INITIATIVE

Preface

Science shapes American society in many ways, from the scientific information that guides fundamental personal choices—like which foods we eat and products we buy—to the technologies that lead to entirely new industries. Every day, Americans enjoy the benefits of science, including job growth, economic prosperity, cutting-edge disease treatments, cleaner drinking water, and the technological advances that enable faster communication than ever before.

The essential role of the natural and social sciences in everyday life raises a number of questions about how Americans view science, scientists, and the impacts of scientific research. Decades of public opinion surveys provide a useful window into our general attitudes about science, such as confidence in the scientific community and support for science funding, and our views on more specific questions, such as the level of trust in scientists to contribute impartially to public debate.

The available data paint a picture of a heterogeneous public whose perceptions are dependent on context and values. The goal of this report is to increase awareness of these nuances among science communicators, advocates, and researchers so they can better understand their audiences when developing outreach programs, messaging strategies, and educational materials. By identifying gaps in the current understanding, this report underscores the need for additional studies on the influences on attitudes toward science, as well as how those attitudes impact both personal decisions and public support for evidence-based policy. For additional data pertaining to these issues, the reader is encouraged to consult the publications in which the research originally appeared.

This report is the first in a series of publications from the Academy's Public Face of Science Initiative, a three-year endeavor to learn more about the complex and evolving relationship between scientists and the public. Subsequent reports will highlight the numerous ways that individuals encounter science in their everyday lives and present recommendations for improving the practice of science communication and engagement.

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