TuSalud

What if MAGA Has a Point About Science?

Conservative distrust of science helped set the stage for its dismantling. Can scientists bridge the partisan divide?

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American science stands on the precipice. On one side is the administration of Donald Trump and MAGA political leaders threatening to push us over the cliff; on the other is the quick plunge to oblivion.

This is no exaggeration. While ostensibly the administration's actions are couched in the dual language of budgetary concerns and the elimination of DEI initiatives, the reality is much more broad, and much more bleak. Science across the nation is getting strangled, with funding streams to universities being summarily cut off, staff members of national agencies dismissed, and budgets getting axed.

But the administration isn't acting in a vacuum; Trump is not moving without impetus. For at least two decades, there has been a growing distrust of science within conservative circles, a distrust supercharged by the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout. The "Make America Great Again" circles — both its political leaders and their supporters in the public — don't just endorse the reshaping of a system that has been in place since World War II. They are cheering on its destruction.

As scientists, my colleagues and I were taught to look hard at the evidence, no matter how uncomfortable or even distressing. I watched in dismay as public trust in science plummeted during the pandemic, and as anti-vaccine sentiments became a calling card for the hard right. I spent months grappling with this painful information. I had assumed that the general public would always love science. This turned out to be a very dangerous assumption indeed.

During the summer of 2020, I drafted a book that wouldn't be released for another four years, mainly due to academic resistance to the topic. In the book, I predicted that the relationship between science and the public was at a tipping point, and that if we didn't institute reforms, our beloved institution would be decimated.

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I wish I hadn't been so right. But now, at least, the evidence of the breakdown is unignorable: The confidence that conservatives have in science has hit its lowest point since the General Social Survey started tracking such opinions in 1973. They don't want our research. They don't want our expertise. They don't want many of our results.

Science can no longer depend on the broad, bipartisan, neutral support it has enjoyed for over half a century. And so as a community, when faced with this evidence, we scientists are motivated to search for a root cause, of which there are several. One of the potential causes is the coalescence of bad faith actors, especially post-COVID. Activists and social media personalities feed into disinformation campaigns, disingenuously warping honest scientific results to fit preconceived narratives and highlighting shoddy, even fraudulent, work to advance their own goals, which also happen to include the destruction of science as a source of credibility and expertise.

Here's another possible cause: MAGA has a point.

The MAGA distrust in science is multilayered and has deep roots, but I believe it boils down to three intertwined strands.

Conservative academics have long felt ostracized by universities, whose faculty and administration, despite noble arguments of impartiality, act to diminish and disregard traditionally conservative lines of thought. This creates grudges and an intellectual foundation for further anti-science rhetoric.

MAGA-aligned politicians, like Sen. Ted Cruz, also argue that we are wasting money on useless research, whether it's an over-expensive telescope or "woke" social science experiments. Even if these aren't costly endeavors compared with the total federal budget, when you're struggling to put food on the table — as many Americans are — government waste becomes any easy target for your frustrations. This creates a convenient hook into the public dialogue and serves up a simple narrative for taking down science.

Lastly, right-leaning Americans, whether they are already sympathetic to MAGA policies or not, have a more negative perception of scientists, according to a 2024 Pew survey. To me, this shows that many feel they are being lectured to by public health officials and scientists in public-facing leadership positions and are tired of it. They are sick of what they consider to be moralizing, demonizing, and recommendations and instructions that ignore moral or religious authority. I'll be honest, I found it annoying to wear a mask every time I stepped out into public; I can imagine it being doubly so when you're constantly made to feel ashamed by public health authorities for choosing not to.

Some scientists have unintentionally rubbed many Americans the wrong way, creating plenty of clear space for bad faith actors — hard-right media personalities and politicians — to make successful headway, building the opportunity for those same actors to have the political backing they need to tear down one of our most treasured national institutions.

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As scientists, we are also trained with how to deal with evidence, which is to create a hypothesis and test it. So in the face of these bare facts, here is my hypothesis: What if we listened to those sympathetic to MAGA?

The only way science can succeed for generations is to win over the hearts and minds of the entire electorate, not just liberals. The decades-old arguments about science as the engine of prosperity and innovation don't seem to be resonating with broad swaths of the public anymore. If we want bipartisan support, we need to become bipartisan.

So let's change.

The first step is humility. We need to look MAGA supporters in the eye and admit openly that we've made some mistakes. We need to tell our MAGA friends, relatives, and politicians that we hear them and offer concrete solutions. This is the basis of the philosophy of radical empathy: the kind of empathy given with no expectation of receiving it in return.

A scary place, for sure. What if they use this as an excuse to destroy science? Well, they're already destroying science — not much to lose on that front. Plus, MAGA is literally in charge right now, and we should plan for them to continue to be in charge, or at least a powerful political voice, for quite some time.

First, the universities, the academic bedrock of modern science, need to heed their own values and enact policies that prevent departments from psychology to physics and everything in between from becoming echo chambers. These policies can include inviting more conservative (and specifically MAGA) speakers and recruiting diverse political viewpoints among faculty. We are supposed to embrace and confront dissenting views, not reject them.

Perhaps with different political views heard and respected within the halls of academia, intellectual conservative voices can provide the heft needed to make pitches for "useless" science projects resonate across the aisle and with a broader slice of the American public.

How does a new project fit into a conservative, or even religious, worldview? How can valid moral or ethical — or even budgetary — concerns receive the proper venue for consideration in the decision-making process? These questions can only honestly be answered by someone with deep personal political conservative conviction.

And lastly, maybe academics need to do less talking and more listening, especially when it comes to the fraught arena of public policy. There is no doubt that science offers valuable input when it comes to policymaking, but it is far from the only voice at the table. We are most respected when we do what we do best: study and learn. We can offer advice, perspectives, and analysis. When we make the jump to offering recommendations and advocating for particular policy outcomes, whether it's about climate change mitigation or mask mandates, we get lumped in with the authority figures pushing those views.

I've had absolutely zero policy training as a student of science; I doubt most of my colleagues

have either. If we're going to wade into political waters, we better learn how to swim with the sharks first.

I trust that most Americans want what I want: a stable home and a prosperous future for our children. Sadly, many of those same Americans do not see science as a path to achieving either of those visions. But if we are to take our vocations seriously and respect the rule of evidence as the guiding force in our decisions, then we must take the lesson we have learned from evolution: We must either adapt or die.

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