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Public Views of Scientists

A Louis Harris poll taken in late 1972 allows one to make a quantitative analysis of how the public feels about scientists. The result is rather different from what has often been bemoaned.

While the proportion of the public expressing "great confidence" in the people "running science" has fallen from 56 percent in 1966 to 37 percent in 1972, this decline does not support the notion that the public is disenchanted with science. Moreover, the trend might already be reversing itself. Five percent more people in 1972 than in 1971 expressed great confidence in the men and women of science. (Comparable data on 1973 are not yet available.)

This falling away from science is part of a general lessening of faith in American institutions and authorities rather than a major antiscience ground swell. Questions were asked about 16 institutional areas, ranging from religion to the military, from the press to major U.S. companies. Appreciation for all of them, without exception, has fallen since 1966 to below the 50 percent mark.

Science fares better than most institutions. It ranks third in the confidence list, surpassed only by medicine and finance. It ranks higher than, among other things, the U.S. Supreme Court, the Congress, and the federal executive branch. The relative position of science has improved. It ranked fifth in 1966 and since then has surpassed the military and education in the public's trust. While in 1966 it was 16 percentage points away from the highest rating, in 1972 the distance was only 11 points.

Equally interesting are conclusions we have drawn from details of the poll. Young people are *not* the main source of lack of confidence, their elders are. Highest ratings were given to scientists by the age group 18 to 29 (41 percent "great confidence"), the lowest by those aged 50 and over (33 percent). The age group in between was rather close to the younger one (40 percent). The college educated are *not* Luddites or members of the counterculture or of antiscience brigades. They express significantly more confidence in scientists than do high school graduates (49 percent and 33 percent, respectively), who in turn appreciate scientists much more than do those with still less education (20 percent).

People in the Deep South, in the rural parts of the country, and whose income is lower than \$10,000 a year stand out as least confident in the scientific community, as compared to those economically better off and those in the more developed parts of the country. That more "liberal" Americans might add to this main source of discontent is suggested by the fact that those who intended to vote for McGovern were less favorable to scientists than those who intended to vote for Nixon, by a margin of 33 to 41 percent.

Poll data, especially when we must draw on one poll alone, do not provide a precise and reliable reading of the mind of the public. But the data do provide a useful antidote to quick overgeneralizations and grand simplifications as to the scope, source, and direction of antiscience sentiments. For the friends of science, there seems little ground for hysterical alarm. While obviously the work and values of science must be carried to many Americans, a job to which the AAAS has been devoting increasingly more effort, there is certainly no reason to despair of public support or to believe that a greater recognition of the merits of science cannot be regained.—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Professor of Sociology, Columbia University, and Director, Center for Policy Research, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027, and CLYDE Z. NUNN, Senior Research Associate, Center for Policy Research, Inc.*