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UNH Research Finds Trust in Scientists is Consistently Higher among Liberals

Erika Mantz
UNH Media Relations

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Media Relations

September 1, 2015

UNH Research Finds Trust in Scientists is Consistently Higher among Liberals

DURHAM, N.H. – Trust in scientists as a source of information is higher among liberals than conservatives regardless of topic, according to new survey research on New Hampshire residents from the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire. This finding contradicts widespread belief that bias against science goes in either direction depending on the topic.

The new research, conducted by Lawrence Hamilton, professor of sociology and a senior fellow at the Carsey School, found that 71 percent of New Hampshire residents trust scientists as a source of information on vaccines. Trust is also high regarding climate change (62 percent), nuclear power safety (69 percent) and evolution (63 percent). Trust is lower regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) at 47 percent, mostly because fewer people feel familiar enough with the topic to give an opinion.

“As expected, liberals were most likely and conservatives least likely to say that they trust scientists for information about climate change and evolution,” Hamilton said. “Contrary to the hypothesis that bias would go in the opposite direction on certain other topics, we discovered that liberals also were most likely and conservatives least likely to trust scientists about vaccines, nuclear power safety and GMOs.”

According to Hamilton, the research also found that trust in scientists on climate change, vaccines, nuclear power, evolution and GMOs is higher among respondents with a college education. Democrats expressed the most trust in scientists on both climate change and vaccines, while Tea Party supporters expressed the least.

“These results overturn the proposition that with this selection of topics we would find opposite and similarly strong ideological biases slanting in both directions,” Hamilton said. “If such opposite biases exist their effects are relatively weak.”

The newest research follows up on earlier surveys, published in the journal Sage Open last week (<http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/5/3/2158244015602752>), that compared only views on climate change and vaccines. The new Carsey brief includes two surveys conducted in 2015 with more than 1,000 additional interviews and three new questions on nuclear power, evolution and GMOs. Direct link to the brief: <https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/views-of-science>. The data used in this research was provided by the Granite State Poll, conducted by the UNH Survey Center. The work was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation.

The Carsey School of Public Policy conducts research, leadership development, and engaged scholarship relevant to public policy. They address pressing challenges, striving for innovative,

responsive, and equitable solutions at all levels of government and in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 13,000 undergraduate and 2,500 graduate students.

Images to be downloaded:

http://www.unh.edu/news/releases/2015/08/images/img-0TS2_Figure1.png

http://www.unh.edu/news/releases/2015/08/images/img-7TS2_Figure4.png

Media Contact: [Erika Mantz](#) | 603-862-1567 | UNH Media Relations | [@unhnews](#)

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