



## Trust in science and scientists is not eroding in Europe

By Martin W Bauer

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### New insights on trust or public confidence towards science and scientists in Europe

The state of confidence and seeking reassurance of continued trust of science and scientists in society is the subtext of much consideration and concern. Trust is one of those things that happen between people and between people and institutions that only gets noticed when it is in danger of being eroded. Trust makes things easier and less costly; it calms the need to know; where there is trust we do not need to know everything, we take risks on trust; trust is risky, but we take it.

Trust is both a very ancient and a very recent concern. The ancient Greek philosophers considered trust in terms of Ethos and common sense. Relying on Ethos meant enjoying credibility and moral stature within the community the public speaker was addressing to be able to move anyone, however well put their argument. It seems that the same quest continues to preoccupy modern observers.

Do scientists and the scientific institutions have the necessary standing and reputation in the community? It is necessary to give their pronouncements of evidence the weight to carry the argument on controversial issues. And many such issues have animated the public debates over the past few decades. These include climate change, genetically modified crops, stem cell research, toxicity of chemicals, nuclear waste. The question is: is the public taking the scientists' word for it? What else would the new EU quest for 'responsible research and innovation' ([RRI](#)) entail, if not seeking trust through acting responsibly?

### Trust still present

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But what is the state of trust in science and scientists across Europe? In my considered view there is little evidence that such trust is being seriously eroded. The debates over genetically modified crops, stem cell research, and nuclear power might have given rise to concerns that science has lost its cultural authority in Europe. But there is little evidence to support such a conclusion.

Science and scientists are held in unchanged esteem as far as the evidence holds up. This is in contrast to across the Atlantic. There, long-term [evidence](#) shows that science and scientific institutions have lost the trust of the public. It applies differently according to party lines: Democrats continue to stand with science, while Republicans have become much more mistrustful since the 1970s. The partisan debates over climate change in the USA have contributed to these long-term changes, so have the religion-secularism split and a climate of general political polarisation.

The other place where public trust in the scientific-technological system has received a serious indent is Japan. The Fukushima nuclear accident of 2011 and its follow-up have done much to [shake](#) the seemingly unshakable trust in the technological systems. This trust has previously underpinned Japan's post-war success story.

### European specificity

However, across Europe there is little evidence of erosion of trust in science. You might take the old view, that Europe follows the USA in 5-years' time; but this might no longer be so predictable. To the contrary, for example, in the UK trust in scientists has rising to a long-term high. This in a context of a to country that was a major exporter of public debates and doubt over modern science over the past 30 years; suffice to mention the [Public Understanding of Science report](#) of the Royal Society of 1985 and the *Loss of Public Confidence* report of the House of Lords of 2000.

In Britain, scientists now sit with the universally regarded medical doctors in public esteem. This has changed over the past 15 years. During that period, scientists have substituted the bishops of the church at the high table, when it comes to public judgement of 'generally trusted to tell the truth', as featured in the ipsos-MORI [veracity index 2014](#).

One might even argue that the public's relation to science and scientists is entering a new phase: no longer one of trust, but one of public confidence. We tend to trust actors when we have a choice; we shop either here or there depending where we trust to find quality for a fair price. Without a choice—as with democracy, law enforcement and the judicial system in modern society—we can only be confident in their performance.

We might speculate that in the UK, science is now granted a position without an alternative, and giving or withdrawing public confidence in experts is the only option; for some this [conclusion](#) might be reached with a modicum of resignation even worry, as without alternatives, resistance is the only option. There is no concluding evidence as to whether this is also the case in the rest of Europe. Further research will be needed into this changing quality of trust and confidence in science and its institutions.

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