Trump Supporters Distrust Science. We Need New Ways to Engage.

Funding cuts are devastating for U.S. science, writes cosmologist Paul Sutter. Regaining support will require cleaning house and delivering bipartisan messaging.

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It's not quite burning-scientists-at-the-stake bad, but it's close — or at least feels that way. President Donald Trump's administration is openly waging war against universities, closing independent science review panels, funding fewer grants, and shutting down or raising concerns about the closure of important centers of government research (even though in some cases, they're probably not supposed to).

The evidence is now clear that the modern American structure of science can no longer survive as an apolitical entity that enjoys consistent, bipartisan support. Science is now suffering a generational catastrophe, not just in terms of funding, but in terms of political and public support.

Ever since World War II and the stunning success of the Manhattan Project, the United States government has poured money into universities through numerous competitive federal grant programs for the purposes of advancing basic research science. This had led to the American scientific system becoming the envy of the world, and the creation of innumerable technological marvels — not to mention significant boosts to our present-day wealth. Only large government agencies have the stomach for the kind of persistent, long-term thinking that it takes to turn fundamental research into enablers of economic prosperity.

That era is over — and the only chance for survival is to adapt. What does that mean?

In the short term, scientists and institutions will likely need to acclimate to a persistent feast-or-famine funding cycle. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, levels of confidence in scientists among Republican voters are still far below pre-pandemic levels, despite a recent small uptick. And while Democrats in Congress seem more likely to fight to maintain research funding, GOP lawmakers have publicly expressed little interest in preserving science as a national institution even as some have raised concerns more locally.

As such, the odds that the sort of consistent, decade-over-decade support once enjoyed by American institutional science might soon be restored are vanishingly small, at least in the near term. We will see fewer big-science achievements, like the launch of fancy new telescopes, or the

development of new climate-friendly technologies. And with fewer new grants being awarded, even the smaller, less splashy but crucially important incremental advances unfolding across the academic landscape will wither, as scientists everywhere scrounge for fewer available opportunities.

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Researchers will also need to learn to swallow their pride and engage with Republican leadership — including Trump's most die-hard MAGA loyalists. That won't likely be easy, given that Republican political and popular leaders have levied several criticisms against modern science and academic institutions. They have decried, for example, the lack of conservative voices in academia; the intrusion of scientists into policy discussions; and persistently weak justifications for scientific endeavors, among other complaints.

Those criticisms may be tough for researchers to hear, but they are also valid. For too long, research fraud and junk science have gone unchecked. We also don't do a great job of communicating our results to the public, and we are too often averse to exploratory risk for the sake of securing funding. As long as the scientific community ignores these very real problems, it will only work to serve the arguments of our harshest critics. There will always be those who seek to destroy science, of course. But we can effectively blunt anti-science rhetoric if we are willing to admit and address these persistent problems within the research enterprise.

Success on that front will also require scientists to radically revamp their messaging to the public — which in many cases means actually talking to the public. After all, despite creeping distrust within certain factions of the political right in recent years, most people enjoy and support science. That recent Pew Research Center poll, for example, found that 76 percent of Americans are confident that scientists do act in the best interests of the public.

That should be deeply comforting, even in these troubled times, given that it's difficult to get three-quarters of Americans to agree on a salad dressing.

But trust in science doesn't necessarily translate to vociferous support for funding, especially when many of those same Americans are struggling to pay their mortgages or rent. In times of economic pain, perhaps science can be viewed as an extravagance rather than a necessity. And that's what makes the Republican retreat from science under Trump such a potent force — one that scientists everywhere will need to confront and engage with head-on, with new approaches to messaging.

Traditional arguments about financial returns, technological advancements, and unlocking the wonders of the natural universe are now ringing hollow, in large part because science doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's one facet of a wider and finite economic pie that comprises largely public funds. If scientists don't learn to speak to the societal needs of the moment, they risk compounding losses in cultural relevancy and public support.

The good news is that new strategies within the research ranks are already being explored. We've

known for some time that political and cultural values play a large role in support for science, and that speaking across ideological lines, rather than exclusively within them, is vital.

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In past years researchers have launched pilot studies, for example, seeking new ways to effectively reach skeptics — especially around hot-button issues. One study, for example, used a video compilation of Donald Trump speaking about vaccines, and discovered that exposure to his accumulated remarks was associated with increased vaccine uptake. Earlier research has also shown that trusted messengers like evangelicals and retired members of the military can successfully shift perceptions on climate change. And the liberal think tank New America found that climate messages focused on innovation and energy reforms, rather than protecting the environment, resonated most strongly with conservatives.

All of this suggests that understanding the language, values, and trusted figures within conservative circles will be key for scientists going forward. Otherwise, the value of their work risks both public and political indifference. We can no longer assume that conservatives will blindly support science, or that they'll come to our lectures and museums.

Instead, we have to redouble our efforts. We have to meet them where they are with a message that connects to their deeply held beliefs and values, to convince them that what we're doing as scientists is worth it.

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