

Correspondence

Scientists don't need more trust, they need allies

Your News Feature reports scientists saying that they are widely trusted but might be “losing the influence battle” (see *Nature* **655**, 22–25; 2026). Our research shows how that battle can be won: by pairing scientists’ voices with those of the public (A. C. Sabherwal and G. Sparkman *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci. USA* **123**, e2533408123; 2026).

In four studies involving some 55,000 US residents, we compared how endorsements from scientists, citizens and government and industry representatives shaped responses to climate, public-health and technology challenges. Scientific endorsement was the most influential factor – across the political spectrum.

But trusted voices do not operate in a vacuum. Some governments have repealed climate and health protections, and the artificial-intelligence industry resists regulation. As scientists in your Feature warn, institutional support could end up “ping-ponging” as political parties take turns in power.

Our findings reveal that when government and industry opposed a proposal, scientists’ endorsement alone could not save it. But when an idea was supported by citizens and scientists, participants chose and backed it 71–80% of the time.

No one voice can outweigh systemic opposition. Converting trust into influence requires coalitions.

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How scientists can tackle the paradox of polarization

Your Editorials in June called for the European Union to lead on science for democracy (see *Nature* **654**, 841–842; 2026) and for researchers to study political polarization further (see *Nature* **654**, 842; 2026).

In my book *Science in Public Policy for the Public* (2025), I argue that the biggest challenge for democracy is managing the types of research that most people do not understand. Examples include genetics and innovations such as artificial intelligence. Paradoxically, deep frustration with technocracy (expert-based governing) has promoted populism and polarization and undermined public trust.

In the EU, decisions about funding for basic science are made by peer-review panels, which are overseen by an unelected organization, the European Commission. Where is the democratic accountability? The administration of US President Donald Trump wants to replace peer review with political oversight but that won’t deliver knowledge that works.

Making existing institutions more transparent and deliberative is attractive but hard to achieve. In my view, scientists applying for grants should be required to assess their study’s innovation potential and any possible risks in their proposals. Review panels should report on these to policymakers, who can consider the need for public debate. Scientists would then be seen to be delivering results that serve democracy, as you encourage.

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Put health systems at the centre of European heatwave plans

Extreme heat is increasingly becoming a persistent silent killer in Europe. This year’s heatwaves have shown that heat lacks the visible devastation of floods or storms, yet it quietly worsens cardiovascular, renal and mental-health risks (see *Nature* **655**, 288–290; 2026). It also increases pressure on health-care systems.

Plans for dealing with heat in Europe still focus too narrowly on cooling technologies, building designs, school closures and urban greening. These approaches are necessary, but insufficient. Heat is first and foremost a shock to health systems. Its effects do not end when temperatures fall. Heatwaves increase hospital admissions and delay care needs, create workforce pressures and require extra investment in cooling, preparedness and resilient health infrastructure, with costs extending into future health budgets.

The lesson is clear. As the continent warms more than twice as fast as the global average, adaptation must include explicit health-financing plans. Heat responses need health-system stress tests, heat-related expenditure estimates and pre-funded local public-health responses. Defence and education are treated with fiscal seriousness. Heat-health resilience deserves the same.

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Lab leaders should have coaching qualifications

Consultant Sarah Blackford entertainingly maps research careers onto professional football (see *Nature* **655**, 809–810; 2026). She notes the irony that promotion in both fields demands a “new set of skills”: managing people, money and expectations. Yet the analogy should embarrass academia.

Football stopped assuming that its best players make the best managers. To manage in the Premier League, even a World-Cup-winning player must hold a UEFA Pro Licence – which requires years of assessed coursework in leadership, communication and people management. A glittering scoring record does not exempt footballers from the classroom.

Science has no such prerequisite. The main qualification for running a laboratory – overseeing grants and the well-being of researchers – is a strong publication record. This is the equivalent of handing over the dugout to last season’s top scorer and hoping for the best.

The consequences are predictable: graduate surveys repeatedly rank supervision among doctoral students’ chief frustrations. Excellent lab-leadership courses exist but are rarely mandatory.

Funders and universities should copy football and make accredited management training a condition of group leadership – a Pro Licence, in effect, for principal investigators. A high *h*-index shows that someone can score goals; it says nothing about whether they can inspire a team in the dressing room.

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