Log cabins and lab coats

A large-scale study published earlier this year (Gauchat, G. (2012) *Am Soc Rev* 77: 167) reported evidence for a shift in public attitudes towards science in the USA over the past four decades, with political allegiances becoming a major factor in defining whether US citizens perceive science and its findings as trustworthy. While those self-identifying as moderates and liberals have changed little in their attitudes, conservatives have radically shifted their ground. In 1974, more conservatives affirmed their faith in science than any other group. Yet, by 2010, the position had reversed, with conservatives the most sceptical group. While this could be interpreted as evidence that modern-day American conservatism has become stronger by appealing to the prejudices of the poorly educated, two aspects of the study reveal the trends to be more complex. Firstly, the steepest decline in trust in science was among the most highly educated conservatives, implying that it is not simply a red-neck backlash. Secondly, until a few years ago, those describing themselves as 'politically moderate' were the group that actually held science in the lowest esteem, although this may in part be explained by the social composition and low educational level of this group.

The author of the study suggests that one explanation for the shift could be the growing use of scientific knowledge to inform regulatory policy over the period, impacting a wide range of areas, including public health, environmental protection, agriculture and trade. He implies the possibility that science may itself have become more politicized, with its practitioners serving as advocates for stricter regulation. Conservatives, who oppose such regulation for other reasons, whether connected to economic interests, religion or traditional values, may simply have mirrored this trend.

Whatever the underlying explanation, the decline in public confidence in science in the world's leading democracy carries worrying implications. Given just a regular swing of the political pendulum, the need to appeal to a highly informed and motivated group of conservative voters will likely degrade the ability of Congress or any future President to provide the support on which we scientists depend. It is already threatening to delegitimize whole fields of research that are of crucial importance for the future of humanity, in areas such as biodiversity, stem cells, planetary sciences and energy technologies.

The USA remains the undoubted world leader in science. There are many reasons for this, but one is certainly the degree to which government has provided financial support, both for research itself, and for the institutions in which it is prosecuted. Traditionally this has been distributed on the basis of a bottom-up process that values excellence and originality, driven by peer review, over any specific programmatic or politically defined goal. Moreover, Congress has enacted a legislative framework that has allowed higher education and science to flourish, with minimal regulatory interference. All this is potentially jeopardized by creeping political polarization. Hillary Clinton, in her 2008 Presidential campaign, made this threat a major rallying cry, famously denouncing the 'war on science' being prosecuted by the right.

What can be done to arrest this trend or neutralize its consequences for the public funding of basic research?

Scientists becoming more politically engaged on the left might seem an obvious riposte, but there is an equally obvious risk that this will be counter-productive. By enabling conservatives to depict us as 'fellow-travellers' with our own political agenda,

we might actually foster the delegitimization of science, eroding further the respect for our objectivity on which our remaining support depends.

The opposite approach might therefore bear fruit: getting involved in the GOP may be a strategy by which scientists could recapture some of the lost ground. The party of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt was for many decades the major defender of civil rights and freedoms, and there is no reason why it could not be so again. Even if it would seem distasteful to rub shoulders with religious fundamentalists and firearms extremists, arguing the case for the freedom of scientific enterprise inside a party founded on respect for free enterprise in business doesn't seem so inappropriate to me.

There is an important precedent for this in the area of gay rights. Despite the rabid opposition of many right-wingers, the Log Cabin Republicans (www.logcabin.org) have played a significant role in shifting the centre of gravity of the debate about sexual equality, not only within the party, but in society more broadly. They have neutralized the viscerally anti-gay lobby on the right, making it harder for them to defend prejudice. Today's agenda is no longer about the basic rights of homosexuals to live in recognized partnerships or serve openly in the military or in education. It is now about full adoption and inheritance rights, via same-sex marriage, even if there are battles yet to be won.

Lab Coat Republicans could have a similar influence in resetting the terms of the political discourse about scientific research. Free enquiry and business culture can and should be allies, nurturing the ferment of ideas that underpins future prosperity.

Howy Jacobs

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