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Asymmetric Effects of Shifting Trust in Pro- and Anti-Consensus Climate Scientists

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Abstract

The trustworthiness of experts underlies public perceptions in policy domains like climate change. While 97% of climate scientists assert that human-caused climate change is occurring, a far lower portion of Americans agree (60%), which may be due to the perception that there is a legitimate debate. Previous research has focused on strategies to increase trust in climate scientists, broadly. However, the relative credibility of the two camps of scientists is important in determining belief in climate change. Using an experiment that provides hypothetical information about the trustworthiness of pro-consensus scientists (those who believe in human-caused climate change) and anti-consensus scientists (those who do not), we show that trust in both groups has a causal effect on belief in climate change, but this is asymmetric. Interventions that decrease the relative trustworthiness of pro-consensus scientists are effective at decreasing belief in human-caused climate change while interventions to increase their trust are ineffective.