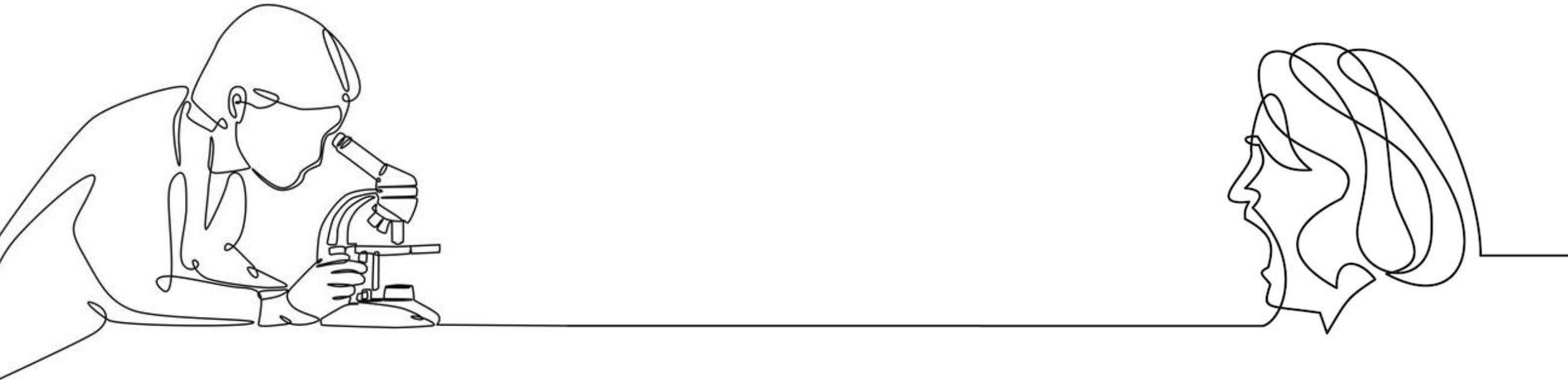


# Polarized Trust in Science and Growing Public Backlash

Cha(lle)nging Contexts for Universities and Their Role in Democracy

**Asst. Prof. Dr. Niels G. Mede**

Wageningen University & Research



## Attacks on universities 'an attempt to control political system'

Former Canadian opposition leader Michael Ignatieff says no sector secure after what has happened in the US

Published on October 28, 2025

Patrick Jack



## Viewpoint: What can Europe and its universities do to halt the erosion of academic freedom?

25 Sep 2025 | Viewpoint

*Action must start on campus, but cannot succeed without broader support*

By [Monika Steinel](#)



## Global Shifts in Scientific Production: The Decline of Academic Freedom and the Impact on International Collaboration

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 23 June 2025

[Rickard Danell](#)



I spent far too much time going through your work and have to say you're a straight up fraud. Should be ashamed.



You filthy piece of shit

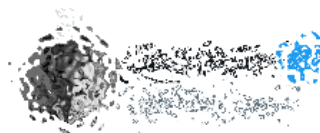


Replying to [@ProfMarkMaslin](#)

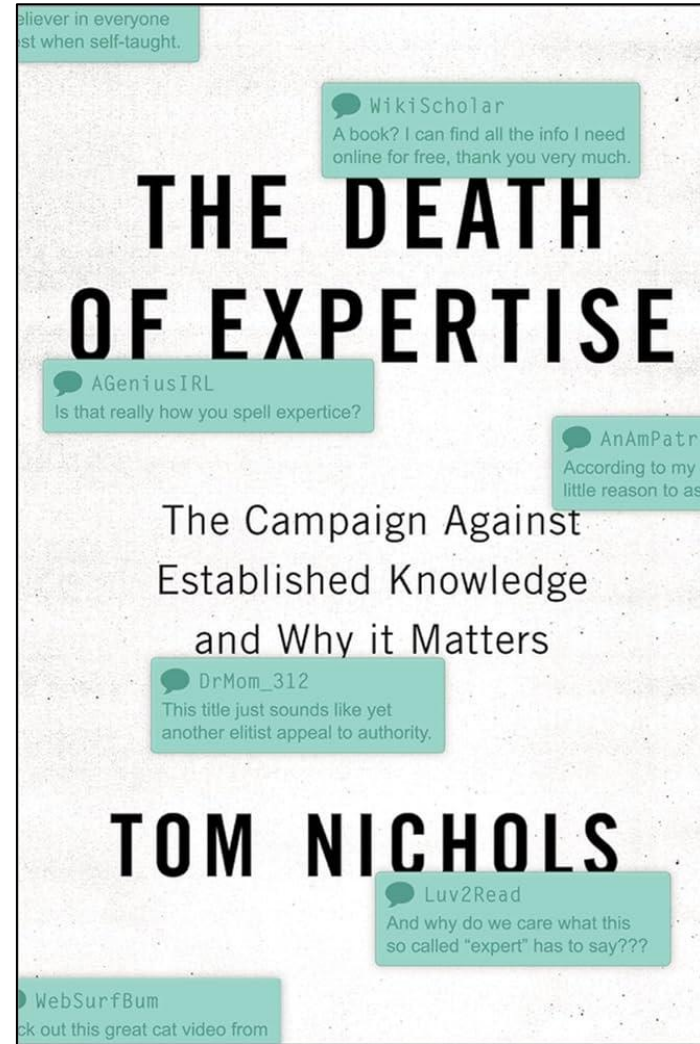
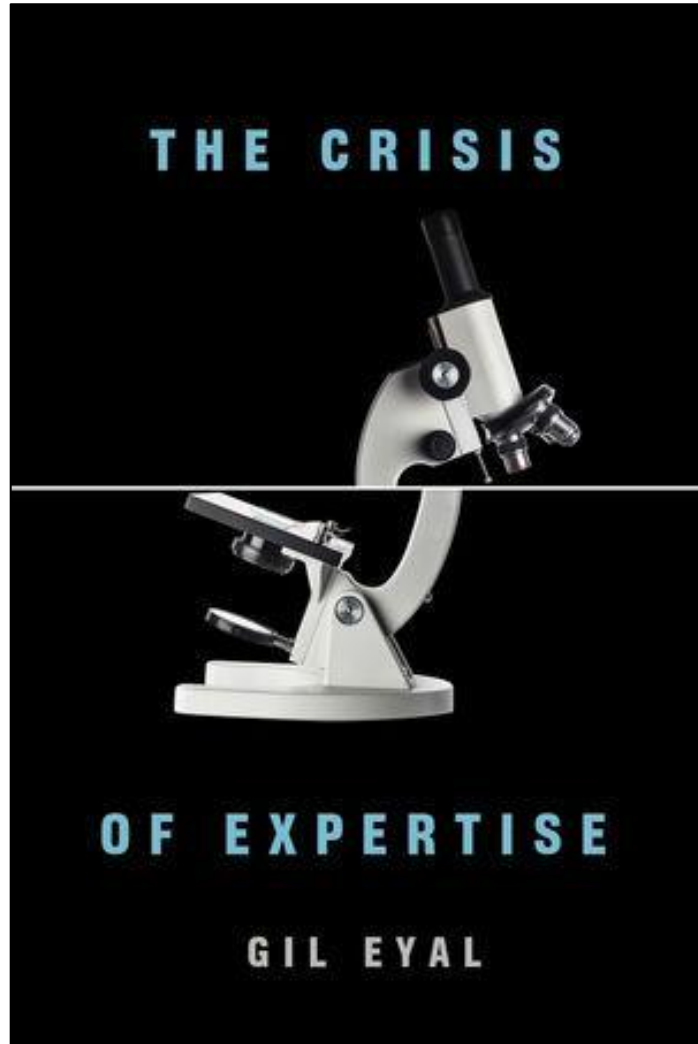
YOU LYING [#ClimateScam](#) artist!!!

Go BEYOND the 1970s!!! You can't can you? Coz your crap DIES when you do that!!! LYING sod.

\*\*\*THEY NEVER GO BEYOND THE 1970s FOR A REASON\*\*\*



I don't know - I don't trust surveys where people survey themselves. This propaganda & fearmongering&politicization about climate&killer viruses will damage your credibility. It's a shame.



**c&en**

# Will public trust in science survive the pandemic?

The confluence of rapidly evolving science mixed messaging, misinformation, and flagrant politicization in the US is creating a perfect storm for eroding trust in science

by **Ryan Cross**

January 25, 2021 | A version of this story appeared in **Volume 99, Issue 3**



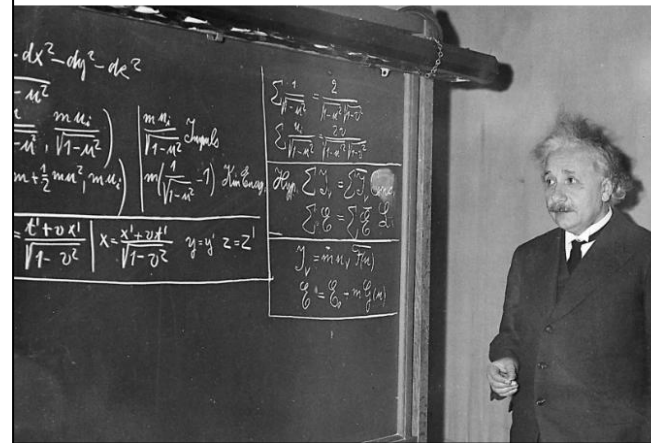
**The Washington Post**

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Americans' increasing distrust of science – and not just on climate change



By **Aaron Blake**



**The New York Times**

## Yale Report Finds Colleges Deserve Blame for Higher Education's Problems

A 10-member committee offered a brutal assessment of academia's role in creating the forces challenging American colleges and universities.

Listen - 5:48 min

Share full article



517



Is there a **crisis of trust** in science?

What are effects of **public backlash** against academia?

What are implications for **universities**?

**Is there a **crisis of trust** in science?**

What are effects of public backlash against academia?

What are implications for universities?



nature human behaviour

NEWS | 14 February 2024

# Largest post-pandemic survey finds trust in scientists is high

Study of more than 70,000 people suggests that trust levels vary among countries and are linked to political orientation.

Viktoria Cologna<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Niels G. Mede<sup>2</sup>, Sebastian Berger<sup>4</sup>, John Besley<sup>5</sup>, Cameron Brick<sup>6,7</sup>, Marina Joubert<sup>8</sup>, Edward W. Maibach<sup>9</sup>, Sabina Mihelj<sup>10</sup>, Naomi Oreskes<sup>1</sup>, Mike S. Schäfer<sup>2</sup>, Sander van der Linden<sup>11</sup>, Nor Izzatina Abdul Aziz<sup>12</sup>, Suleiman Abdulsalam<sup>13</sup>, Nurulaini Abu Shamsi<sup>14</sup>, Balazs Aczel<sup>15</sup>, Indro Adinugroho<sup>16,17</sup>, Eleonora Alabrese<sup>18</sup>, Alaa Aldoh<sup>9</sup>, Mark Alfano<sup>19</sup>, Innocent Mbuli Ali<sup>20</sup>, Mohammed Alsobay<sup>21</sup>, Marlene Altenmüller<sup>22,23</sup>, R. Michael Alvarez<sup>24</sup>, Richard Amoako<sup>25</sup>, Tabitha Amollo<sup>26</sup>, Patrick Ansah<sup>25</sup>

1. University of Oxford, 2. University of Cambridge, 3. University of Edinburgh, 4. University of Vienna, 5. University of York, 6. University of Exeter, 7. University of Bristol, 8. University of Cape Town, 9. University of Michigan, 10. University of Cambridge, 11. University of Cambridge, 12. University of Cambridge, 13. University of Cambridge, 14. University of Cambridge, 15. University of Cambridge, 16. University of Cambridge, 17. University of Cambridge, 18. University of Cambridge, 19. University of Cambridge, 20. University of Cambridge, 21. University of Cambridge, 22. University of Cambridge, 23. University of Cambridge, 24. University of Cambridge, 25. University of Cambridge, 26. University of Cambridge

# Trust in Science and Science-Related Populism (TISP)

A Global Many Labs Study  
with 241 researchers from 179 institutions in 68 countries



**Viktoria Cologne**  
ETH Zurich, Eawag  
*Project lead*



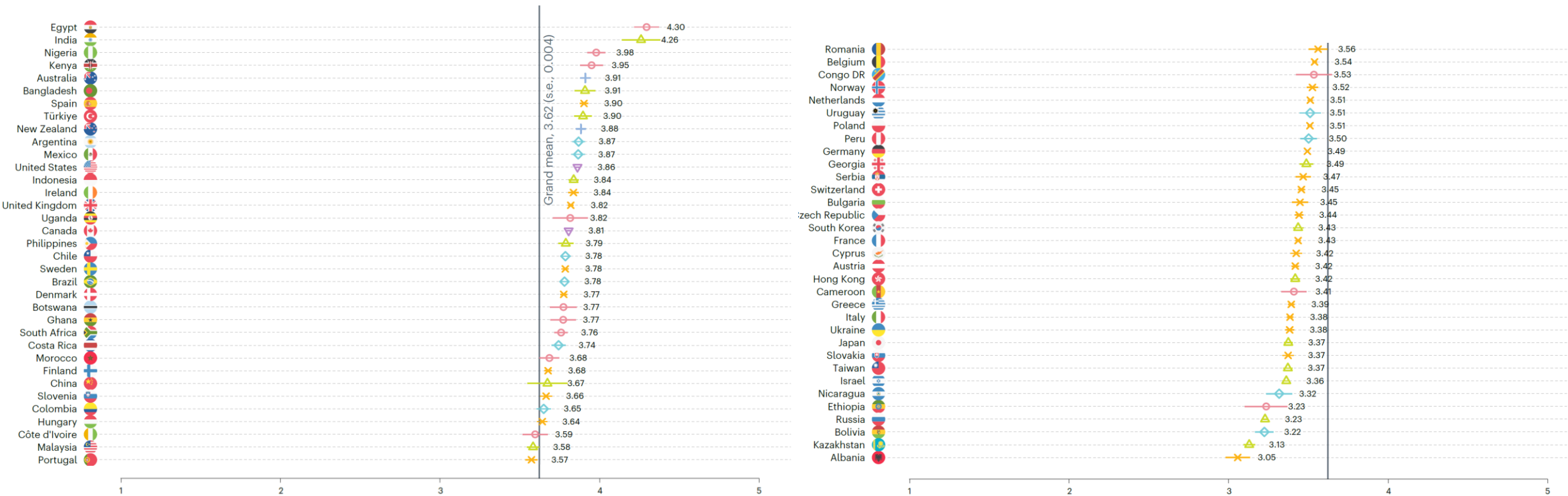
**Niels G. Mede**  
University of Zurich  
*Second lead*

Viktoria Cologne<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Niels G. Mede<sup>2</sup>, Sebastian Berger<sup>4</sup>, John Besley<sup>5</sup>, Cameron Brick<sup>6,7</sup>, Marina Joubert<sup>8</sup>, Edward W. Maibach<sup>9</sup>, Sabina Mihelj<sup>10</sup>, Naomi Oreskes<sup>1</sup>, Mike S. Schäfer<sup>2</sup>, Sander van der Linden<sup>11</sup>, Nor Izzatina Abdul Aziz<sup>12</sup>, Suleiman Abdulsalam<sup>13</sup>, Nurulaini Abu Shamsi<sup>14</sup>, Balazs Aczel<sup>15</sup>, Indro Adinugroho<sup>16,17</sup>, Eleonora Alabrese<sup>18</sup>, Alaa Aldoh<sup>6</sup>, Mark Alfano<sup>19</sup>, Innocent Mbuli Ali<sup>20</sup>, Mohammed Alsobay<sup>21</sup>, Marlene Altenmüller<sup>22,23</sup>, R. Michael Alvarez<sup>24</sup>, Richard Amoako<sup>25</sup>, Tabitha Amollo<sup>26</sup>, Patrick Ansah<sup>25</sup>

# Trust in scientists is moderately high on average.

No country shows low trust.

European countries rank slightly below world average.



**Fig. 1 | Weighted means for trust in scientists across countries and regions** (1 = very low, 3 = neither high nor low, 5 = very high). Total  $n = 69,527$ . Country  $n$ s range between 312 and 8,014 (see Supplementary Information for

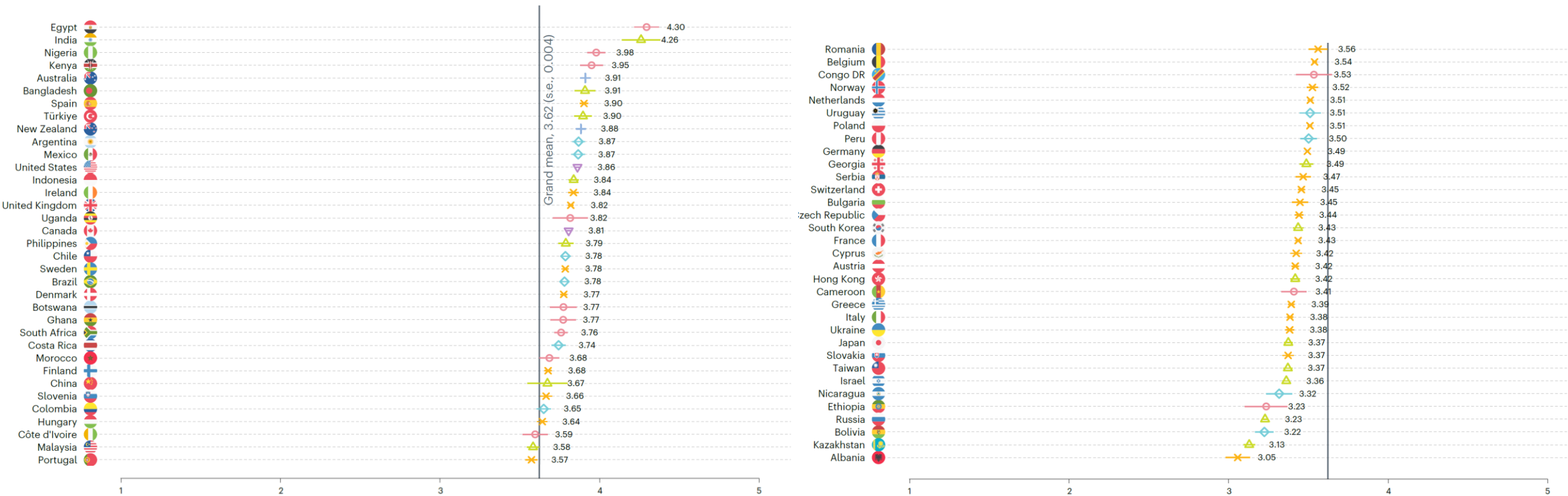
a detailed overview). The vertical line denotes the weighted grand mean. The horizontal lines indicate means  $\pm$  standard errors. Country-level standard errors range between 0.008 and 0.133.

Region ● Africa ▲ Asia + Australia/Oceania ✖ Europe ◆ Latin America ▼ North America

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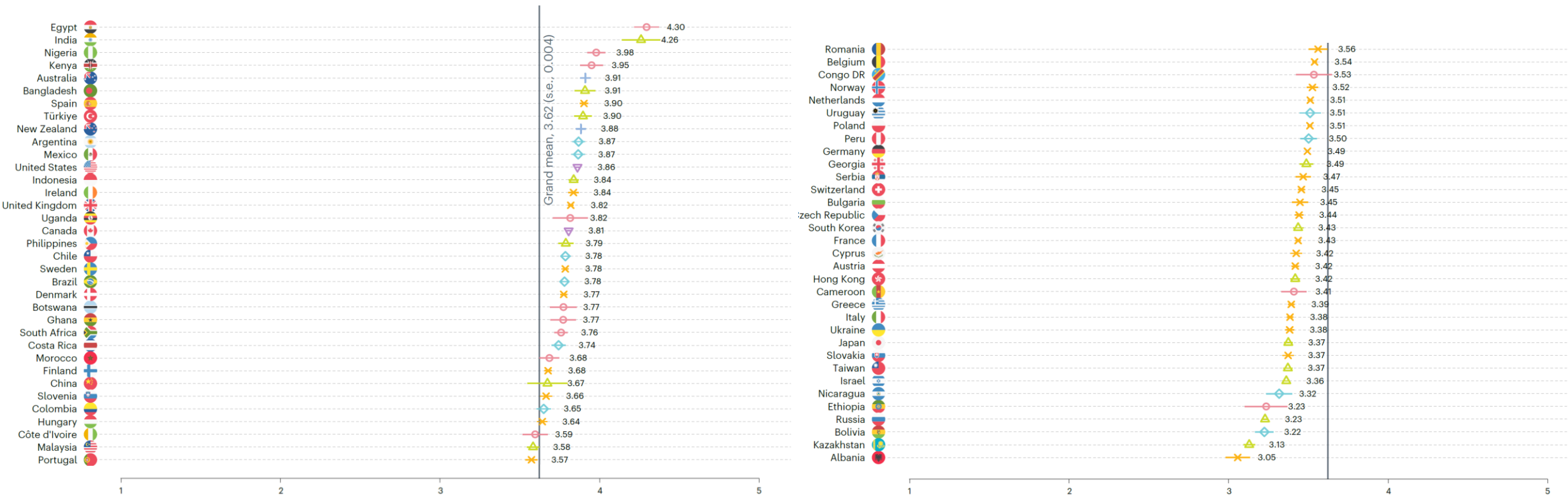
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Region — Africa — Asia — Australia/Oceania — Europe — Latin America — North America

# Big majorities perceive scientists as experts.

Only a minority thinks scientists are dishonest.

However, people are more divided on scientists' openness.

How expert or inexpert are most scientists?



How intelligent or unintelligent are most scientists?



How qualified or unqualified are most scientists when it comes to conducting high-quality research?



How honest or dishonest are most scientists?



How ethical or unethical are most scientists?



How sincere or insincere are most scientists?



How concerned or not concerned are most scientists about people's wellbeing?



How eager or uneager are most scientists to improve others' lives?



How considerate or inconsiderate are most scientists of others' interests?



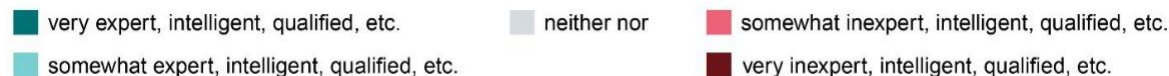
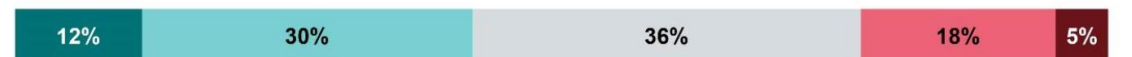
How open are most scientists to feedback?



How willing or unwilling are most scientists to be transparent?



How much or little attention do scientists pay to others' views?



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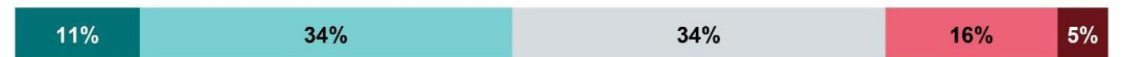
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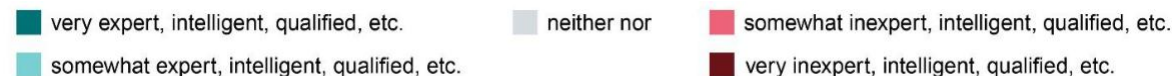
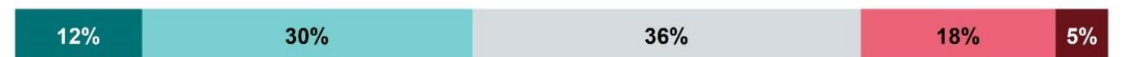
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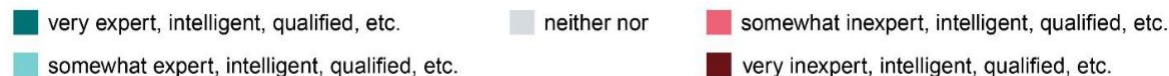
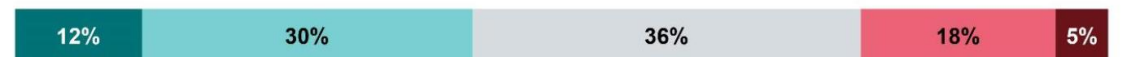
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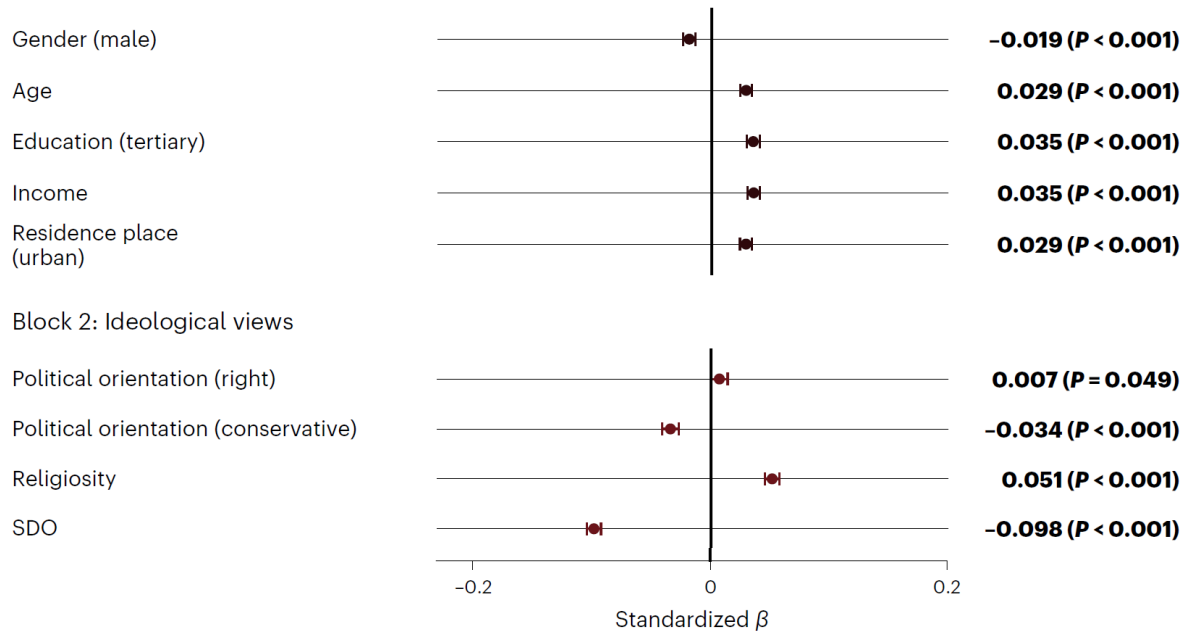


# Demographic factors explain different trust levels.

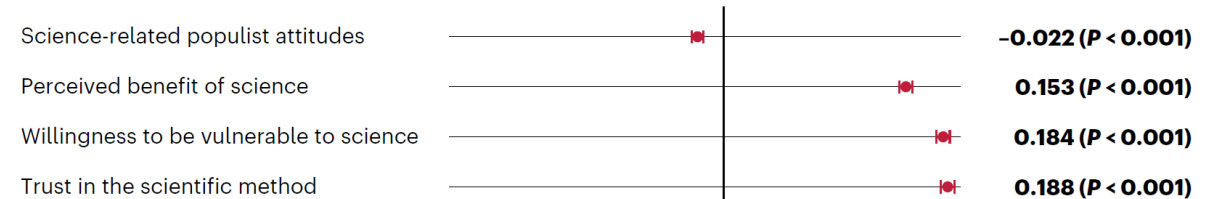
Public trust is polarized along sociopolitical and religious beliefs.

Academic freedom is not a predictor of trust in scientists.

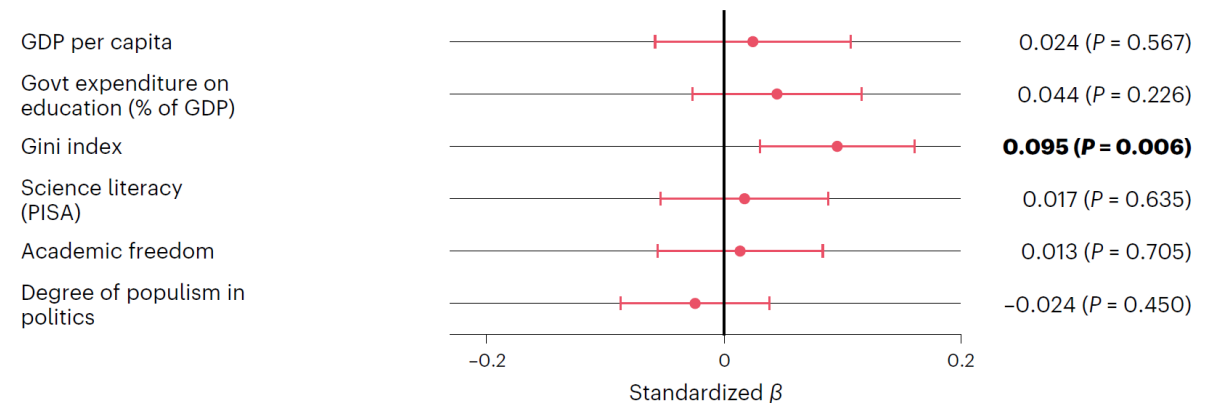
## Block 1: Demographic characteristics



## Block 3: Attitudes towards science



## Block 4: Country-level indicators

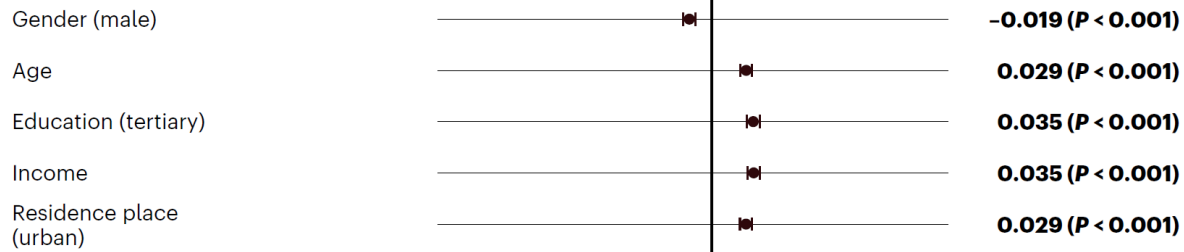


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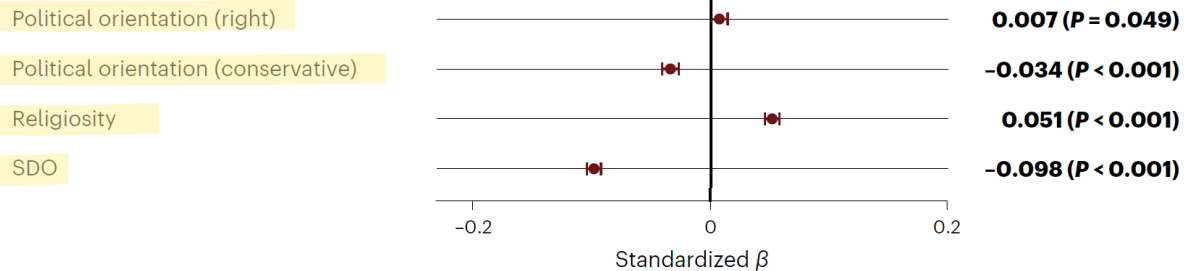
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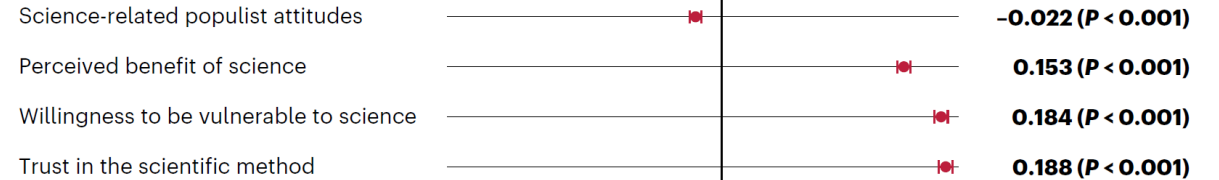
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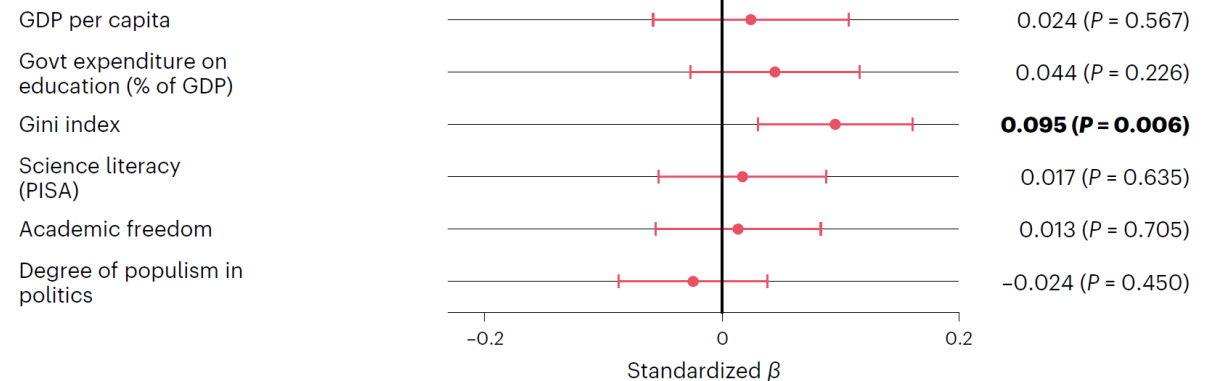
### Block 2: Ideological views



### Block 3: Attitudes towards science



### Block 4: Country-level indicators

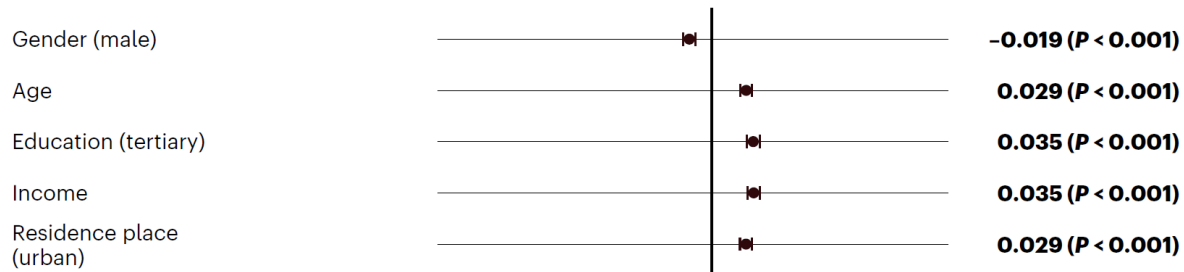


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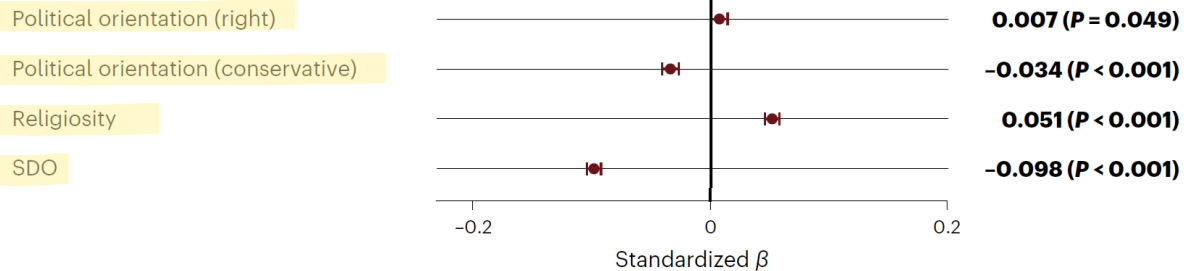
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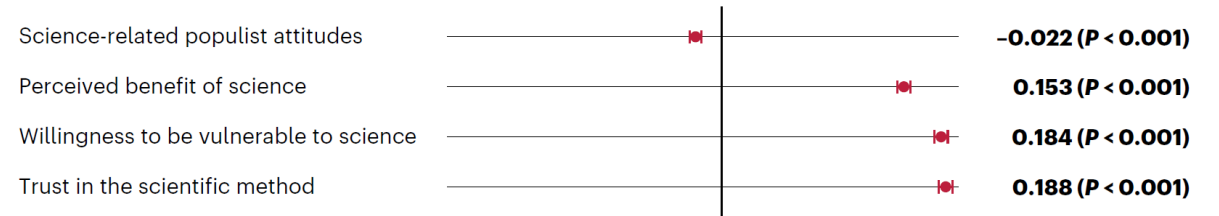
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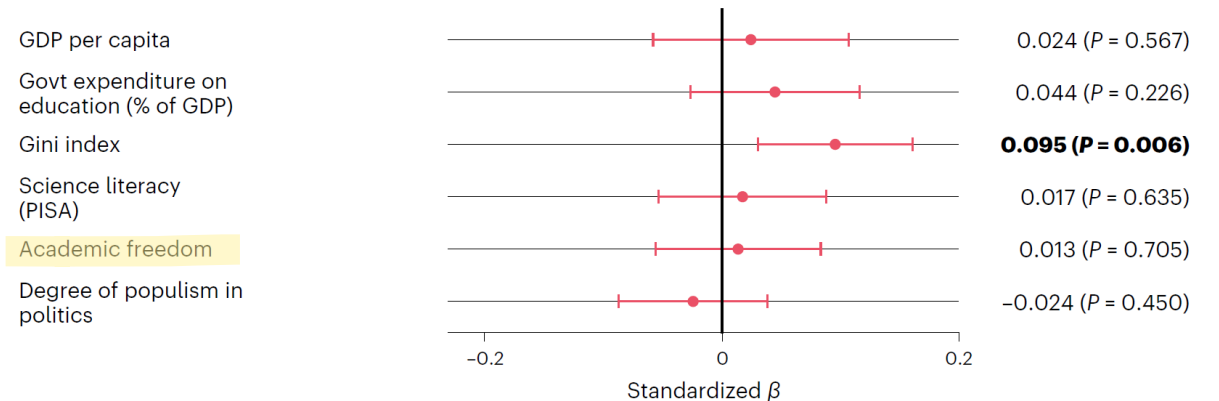
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### Block 4: Country-level indicators



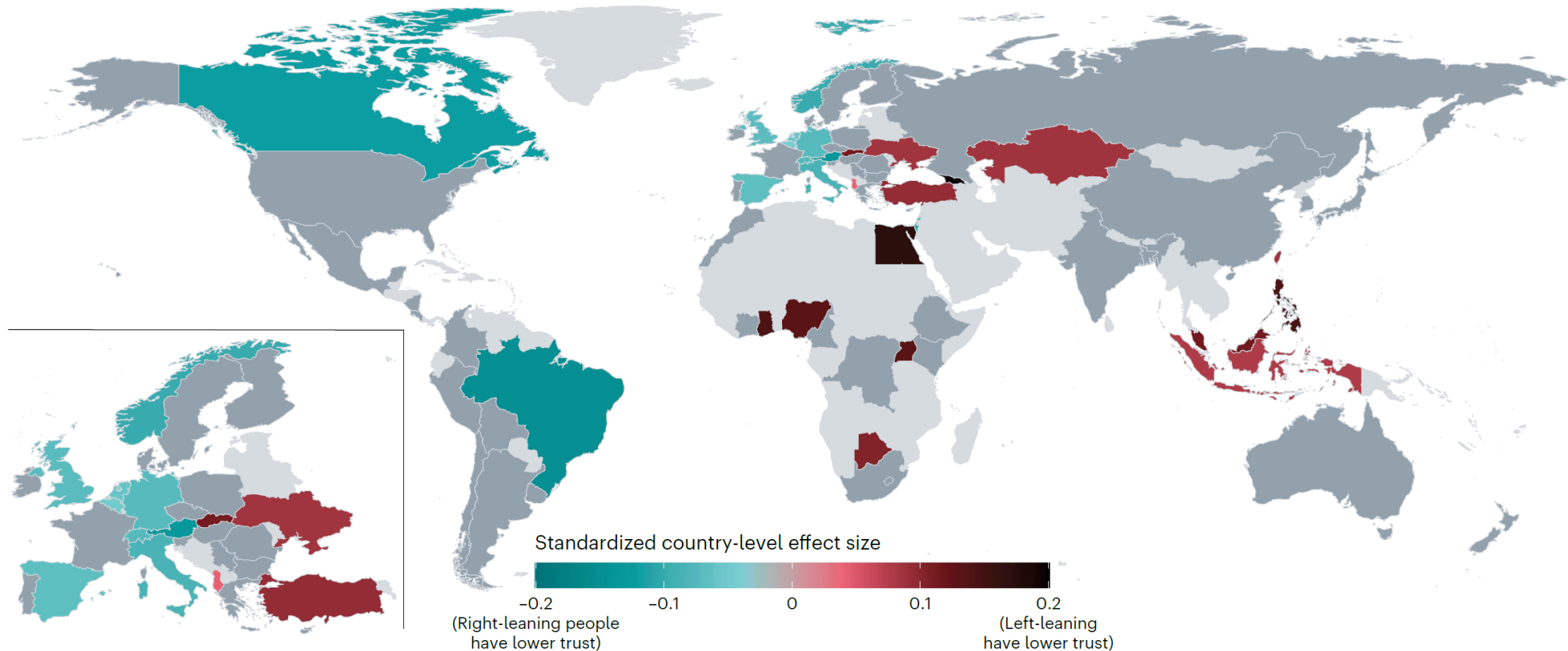
Demographic factors explain different trust levels.

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---

**a** Country-level effects of right-leaning political orientation and trust in scientists



**Is there a **crisis of trust** in science?**

**No**, at least not across the general population. But trust in scientists is **polarized** along sociopolitical views.

Is there a crisis of trust in science?

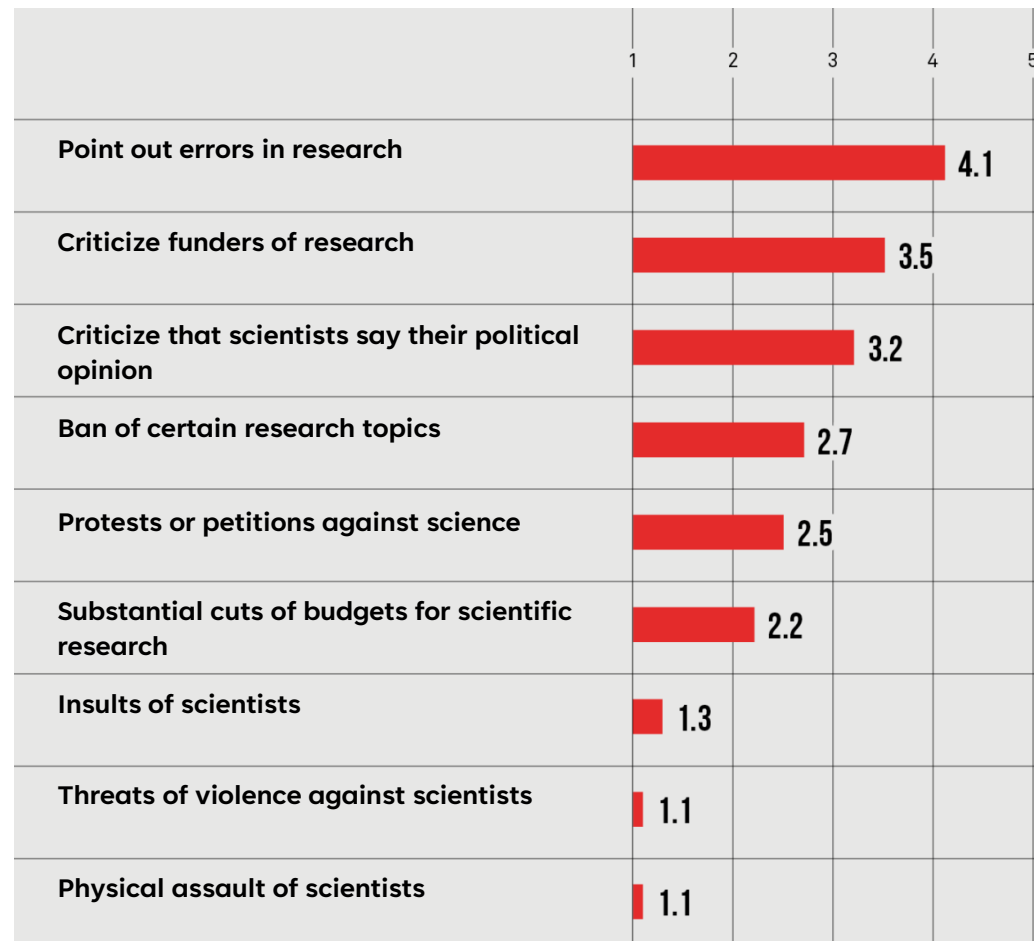
**What are effects of public backlash against academia?**

What are implications for universities?

# People support public criticism of errors and funding relations, but find insults, threats, and assault clearly unacceptable.

Nationally representative survey in Switzerland, 2025

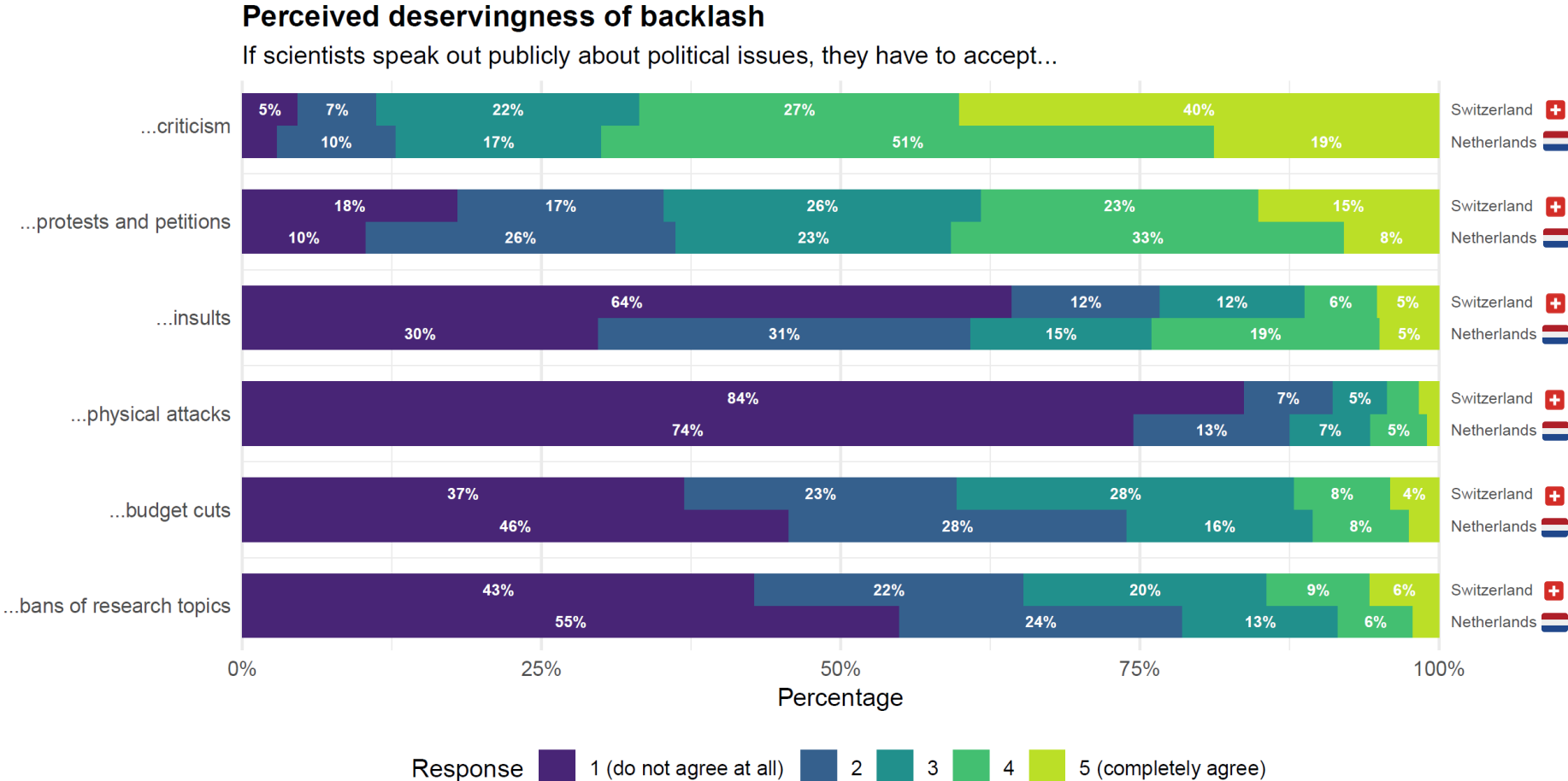
How acceptable are these public reactions against science in your opinion?



1 = not at all acceptable  
5 = acceptable under certain circumstances  
(n = 628–702)

# Noteworthy minorities consider insults, budget cuts, and research bans acceptable if scientists speak out about political issues.

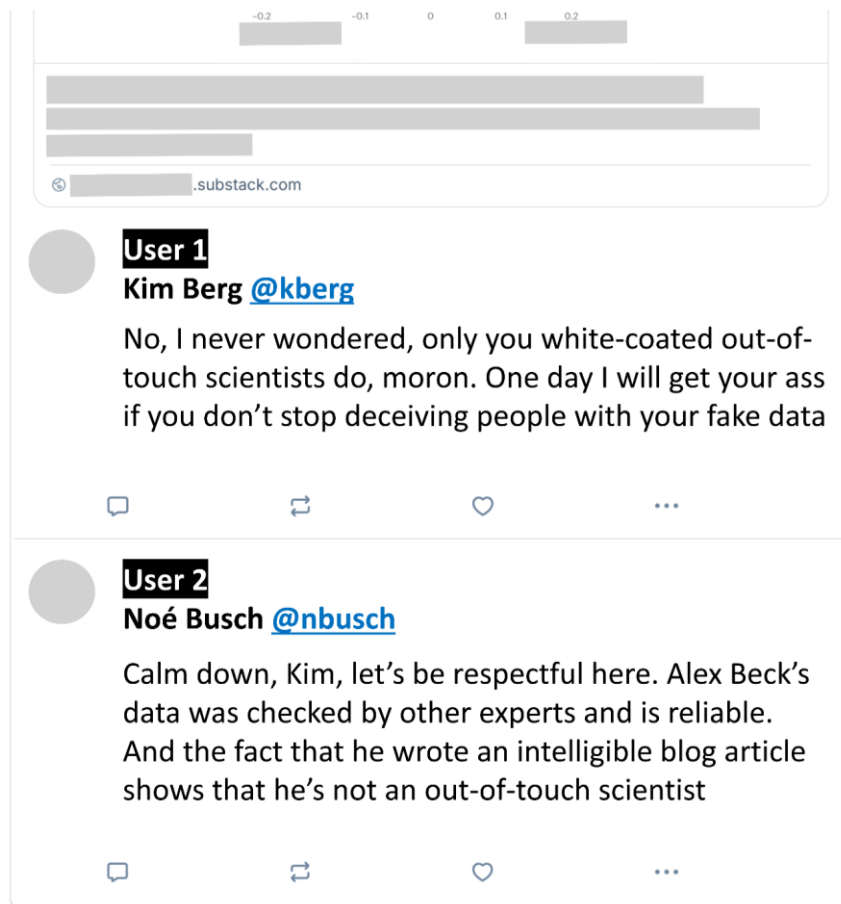
Nationally representative surveys in Switzerland and Netherlands (2025)



# Hate speech against scientists on social media does not reduce trustworthiness, but may even bolster support for science

Online survey experiment in Denmark, Germany, UK, and USA (2025)

---



- **Compassion towards victims:** Hate speech does not reduce trustworthiness
- **Hate against scientists can backfire:** Higher support with scientists under attack, particularly in Denmark and Germany
- **But counterspeech can also backfire:** Gives haters more legitimacy

Is there a crisis of trust in science?

**What are effects of public backlash against academia?**

Effects among citizens are limited, but a concerning, loud minority supports retributive actions against science.

However, hate speech seems to have small effects on public opinion about scientists.

Is there a crisis of trust in science?

What are effects of public backlash against academia?

**What are implications for universities?**

# University communicators are typically not backlash targets, but they support victims and thus require training and resources.

Qualitative interview study with communication officers at 15 universities in 9 countries (2022/23)

---

## Communicators are not often targets, but “in the line of fire”

So far it has always been aimed at either the institution, like the university (...), or individual researchers and colleagues. But luckily, **myself, personally, I haven't experienced it.**

(Netherlands, female)

## Communicators support attacked scientists

We've put up a core team of people who are from different expertise (...). **I remain the point of contact** so that they don't have to call five different people.

(Netherlands, female)

## Communicators also need support

We do have training courses in how to communicate, but not how to deal with just troublesome people.

(Sweden, female)

# University communicators are typically not backlash targets, but they support victims and thus require training and resources.

Qualitative interview study with communication officers at 15 universities in 9 countries (2022/23)

- **Limited institutional impact:** Universities relatively robust to reputational damage, due to experienced communications offices with crisis management expertise
- **Boundary-spanning burden:** University communicators bear an underappreciated double load, acting as buffers between attackers and scientists while also serving as scapegoats

Mede, N. G. & Volk, S. C. Public backlash against science communicators: Conceptualization and qualitative analysis of perceptions, effects, responses, and context factors. Preprint; 10.31235/osf.io/szwqk\_v1 (2025).

*This is a preprint and has not yet been peer-reviewed.*

## Public Backlash Against Science Communicators: Conceptualization and Qualitative Analysis of Perceptions, Effects, Responses, and Context Factors

Niels G. Mede<sup>1\*</sup> & Sophia C. Volk<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Strategic Communication Group, Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Department of Media and Communication, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany

\*Corresponding author, email: [niels.mede@wur.nl](mailto:niels.mede@wur.nl)

### Abstract

Public backlash against scientists increasingly draws concern. It can originate from citizens, politicians, or journalists and range from legitimate criticism of scientific work to harassment and physical attacks. However, criticism and harassment also affect science communication professionals, which has received comparably little public and scholarly attention. Our study addresses this gap. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 15 university communicators from multiple countries, we develop a conceptual model that systematizes

# University communicators are typically not backlash targets, but they support victims and thus require training and resources.

Qualitative interview study with communication officers at 15 universities in 9 countries (2022/23)

- **Resilience and positive effects:** Many communicators show resilience and report cognitive, affective, and institutional benefits from navigating backlash — suggesting they have more agency than public discourse typically assumes.
- **Country-level differences:** No single standardized approach to handling backlash is universally effective (e.g., Netherlands and Germany seem better equipped)

Mede, N. G. & Volk, S. C. Public backlash against science communicators: Conceptualization and qualitative analysis of perceptions, effects, responses, and context factors. Preprint; 10.31235/osf.io/szwqk\_v1 (2025).

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Is there a crisis of trust in science?

What are effects of public backlash against academia?

**What are implications for universities?**

Universities can rely on largely supportive publics – but they need to maintain agency and allocate financial resources to protecting their employees and reputation.

# Thank you!

**Asst. Prof. Dr. Niels G. Mede**  
Wageningen University & Research

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