Public Perceptions on Emerging Science Policy Issues

November 6, 2026

ASTC Association of Science and Technology Centers

Introduction

Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC)

Our 700+ members:



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Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC)

Our 700+ members:



Support lifelong science learning



Connect science and society



Engage diverse communities



Partner to tackle local and global challenges

Supporting the Work:

ASTC creates strategic opportunities, develops intellectual capital, and assembles resources to serve our members working in a wide variety of contexts—all aimed at supporting members in realizing their goals to engage their communities.

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ASTC's Future of Science Focus

Building Trustworthy Institutions of Science

1 Responsive

Greater public relevancy and benefits to all people

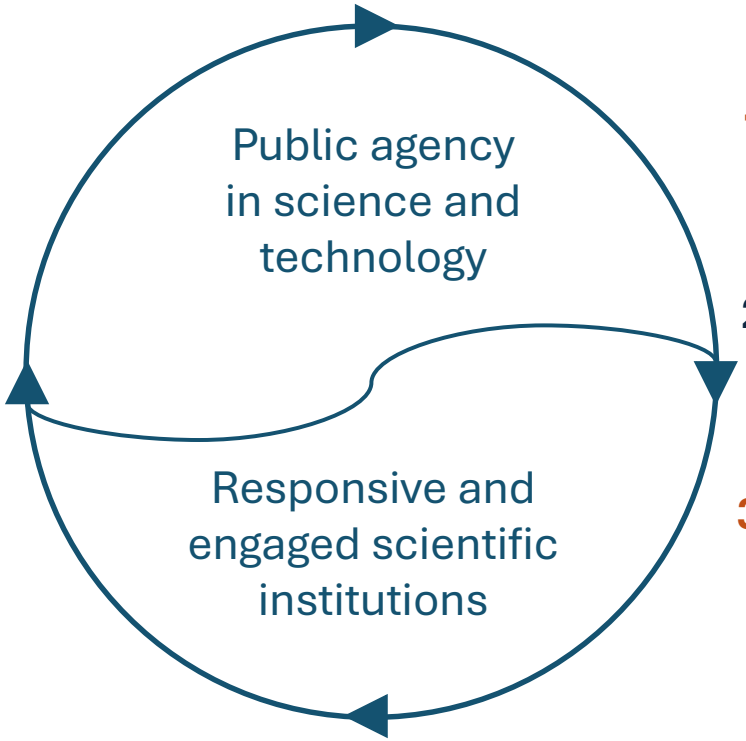
2 Engaged

Reflective of public perceptions and values

3 Accessible

Increased public understanding and pathways to influence

Powering the flywheel that drives public trust



1 **Perceptions Research and Communication**

2 **Community Capacity Building**

3 **Sense-making for Decision-makers**

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Understanding Public Perceptions and Values of Science and Technology

Perceptions of science

- Views on science vary based on age, race, educational attainment, region, political ideology and other characteristics.
- Views will vary based on the specific science issue and institution
- It is important to distinguish between science and science policy
- Historical context and degree of partisan polarization can have a significant impact

Understanding Public Perceptions and Values

Trust as a metric

- Strengths
  - Comparing between institutions and leaders
  - Availability of longitudinal data

- Weaknesses
  - Challenging to measure
  - Trust in science is not directly indicative of support for science funding
  - Individual and institutional decision-making depends on more than trust

Understanding Public Perceptions and Values

Methodology



Sample

- Each 1000+ adults (age 18+) in the United States
- Data Controlled for Census Representation Distribution
- Volunteers through Big Village/CARAVAN panel



Surveys

- Administered by EDGE Research
- Online
- Pulse Survey - April 4-6, 2025
- Gold Standard Science - August 8-10, 2025
- Science for Policy - August 14-16, 2026
- **Policy for Science – October 16-18,2026**



Focus Groups

- Gen Z (non-college)
- Gen Z (college)
- Swing Voters
- Conducted February 2026

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People value science

People Value and Rely on Science

People value and use science but that doesn't mean they are tracking what is happening

- Over 7 in 10 people say science and medical research benefits "people like me"
- 9 of 10 respondents use information from federal funded data sources at least weekly
- Over 8 in 10 people say federal investment in scientific data is important
- Half of people have not heard of policy changes related to federal research

BUT there is a **persistent need** to **close gaps in public understanding of how science and technology are enabled and impacted by federal policy.**

Based on April 2025 and August 2026 Surveys

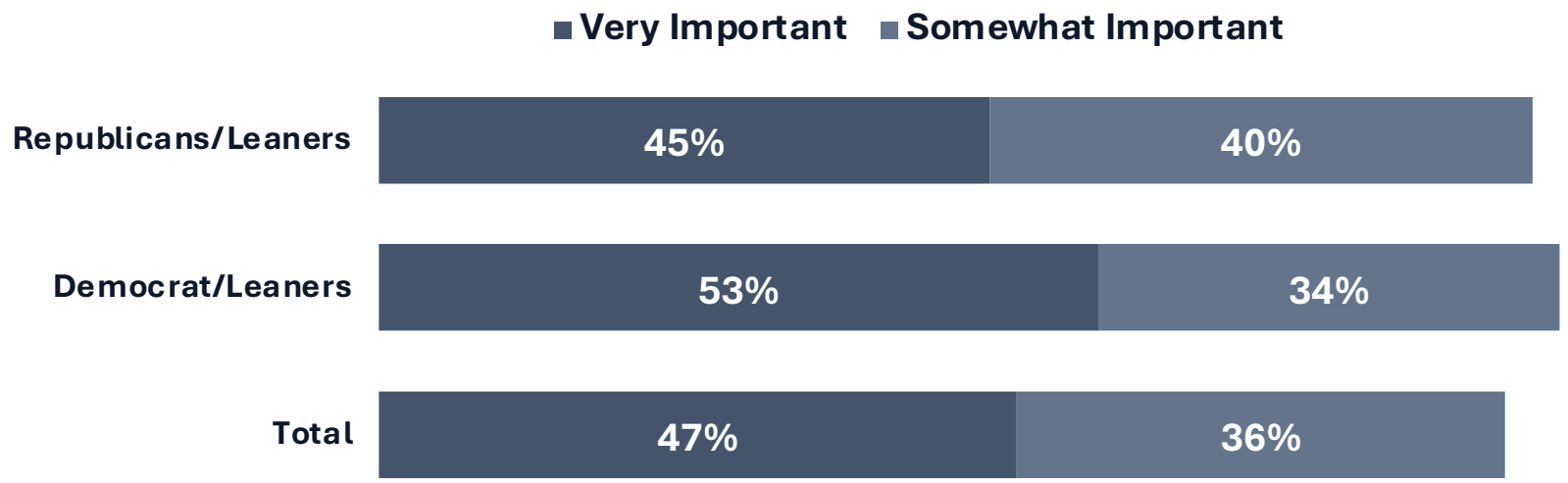
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A preference for expertise over politics

Policy for Science

Across the political spectrum people want science to be free from political influence

Percent of respondents who say it is important for experts at federal scientific agencies to make decisions on scientific funding, regulations, and guidance free from political influence:



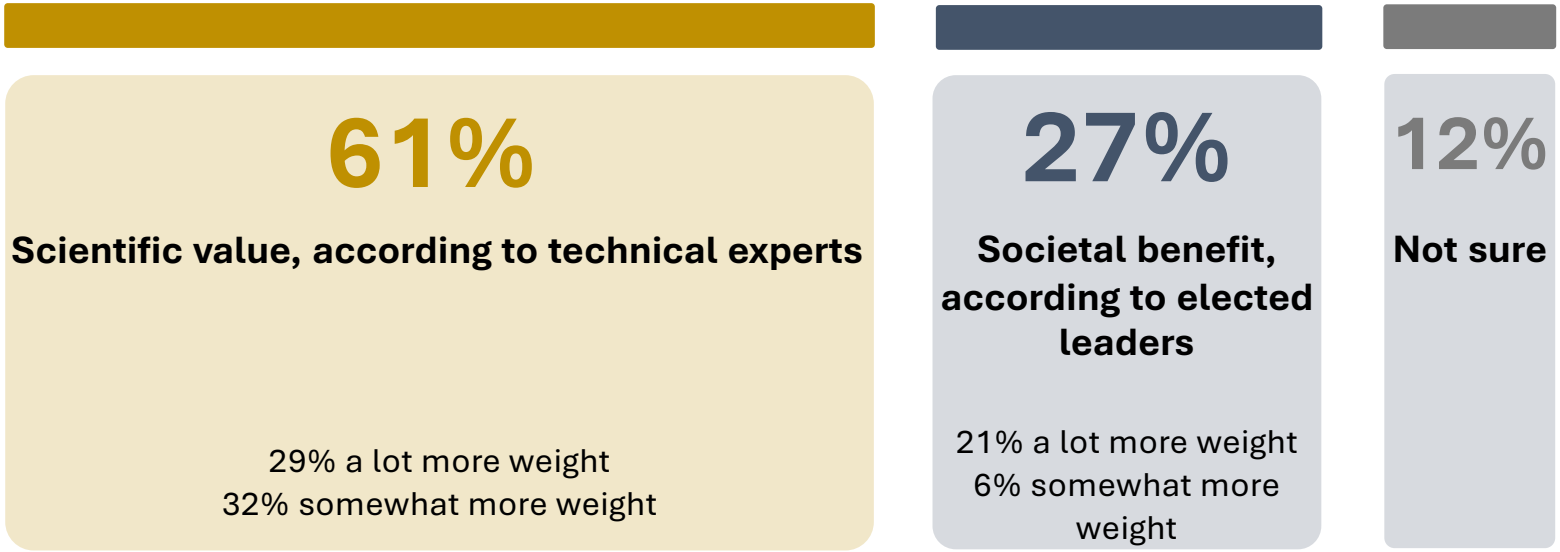
Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

Scientific value of the research should be given more weight in funding decisions

Percent of respondents who say the following should be **given more weight** when determining which scientific research should receive government funding:



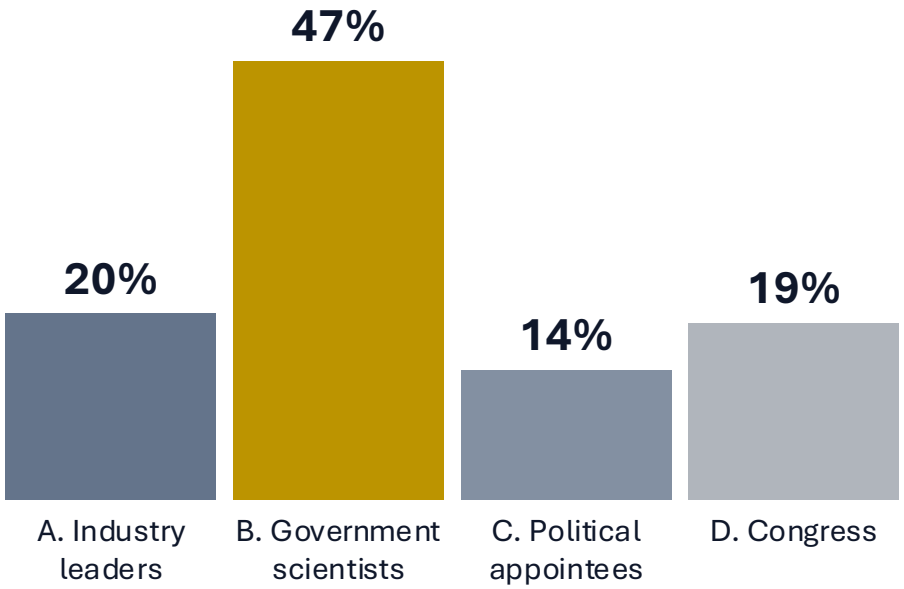
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Policy for Science

Strong preference for scientists to set national priorities in major scientific fields (e.g. AI, medicine, energy)

Percent of respondents who ranked the following perspectives as the “most important”:



A. **Industry leaders** because they understand market needs and technological development opportunities

B. **Scientists** who are hired by the government for their expertise because they have the knowledge and training to evaluate the ideas

C. **Political appointees** chosen by the current President because they are responsible for carrying out the priorities of the elected administration

D. **Congress** because they represent the views of Americans in every state and district

46% also ranked political appointees as having the “least important” perspective

Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

The public rejects actions that politicize science decision-making

- Almost half of people preferred government scientists setting decisions over industry leaders, political appointees, or Congress; political appointees ranked the lowest

- Over 8 in 10 people want experts to make decisions on funding, regulations, and guidance free from political influence

- 6 in 10 people wanted more the scientific value of the research to be given more weight than the societal value

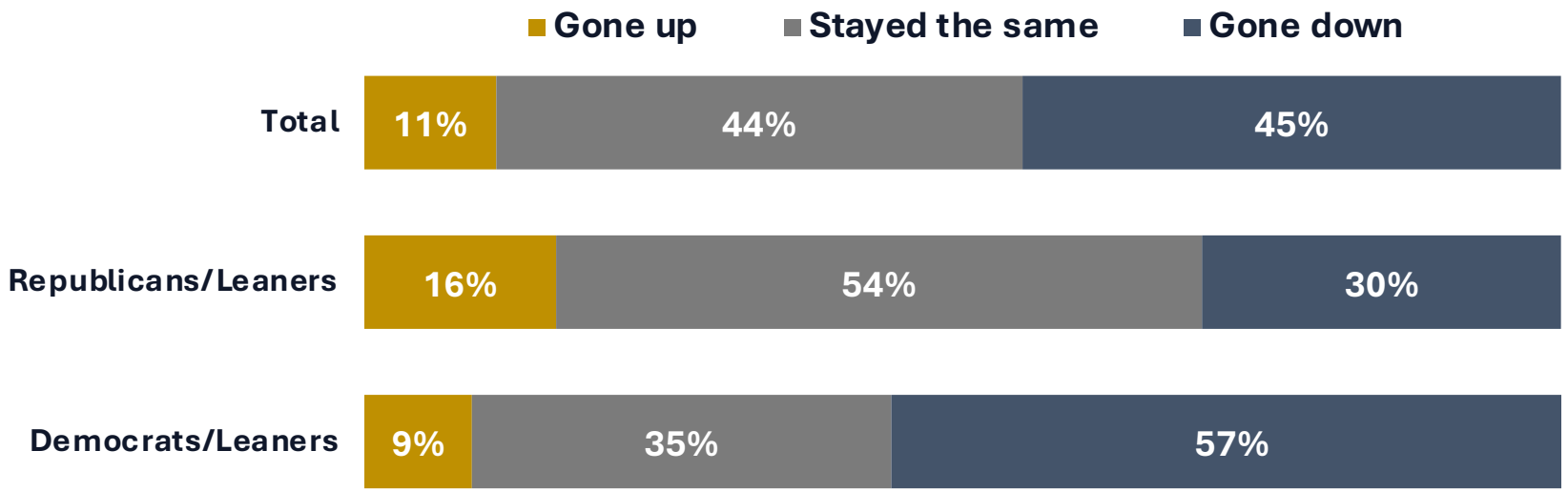
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Building confidence in scientific leadership

Policy for Science

Confidence in the leadership of government science agencies is declining

Percent of respondents whose confidence in the leadership of government science agencies (NSF, NIH, etc.) has _____ in the past year:



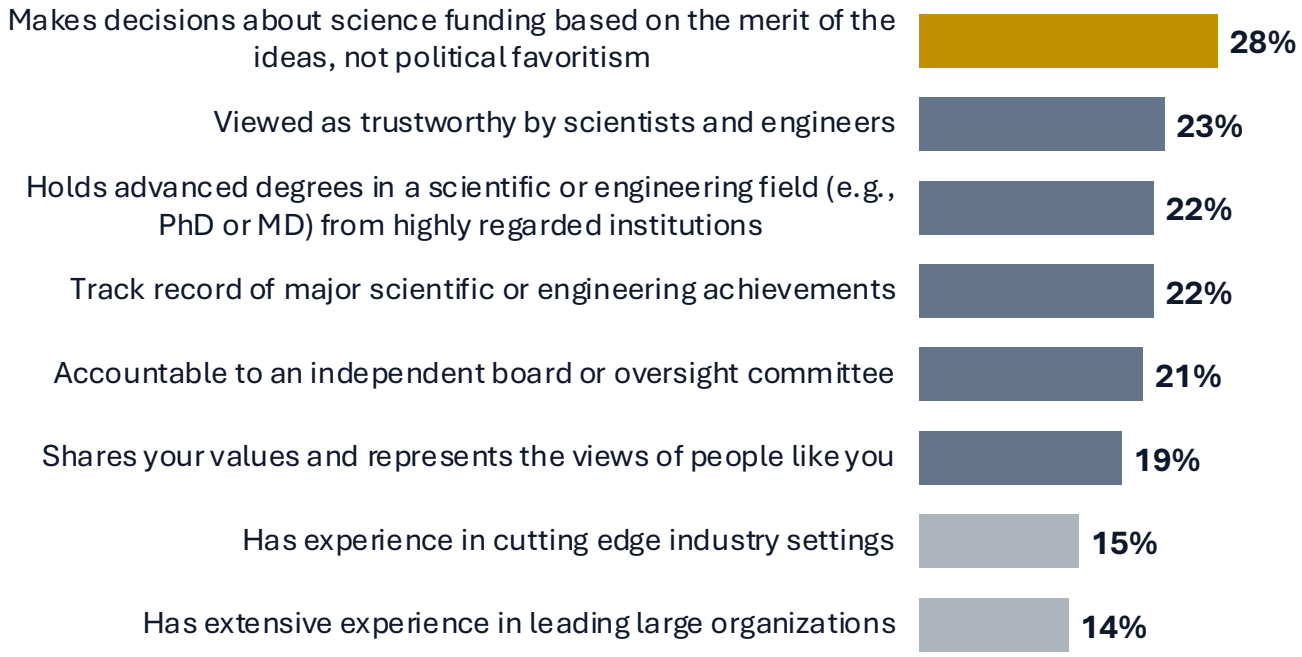
Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

Leaders who make decisions based on merit not political favoritism are more likely to earn the confidence of the public

Percent of respondents who said the following would *greatly increase* their confidence in the leadership of a government science agencies (NIH, NSF, etc):



For all options:

- Almost half of respondents said these factors would increase confidence
- Around a quarter said they would have no impact

Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

Consulting scientists and tracking impact build confidence in science agency's strategy

Percent of respondents who said the following would *greatly increase* their confidence that an agency's 10-year vision will benefit people like them:



Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

Confidence in government science leadership is declining; a range of different actions could restore it

- Only 1 in 10 people say their confidence in government science agencies has gone up despite recent significant policy overhauls justified in terms of building trust
- Merit based decision-making continues to rank high on public priorities; almost 3 in 10 people said it would greatly increase their confidence in leadership
- Scientists-in-the-loop on strategy development; almost 3 in 10 said consulting scientists and engineers would greatly increase their confidence in a 10-year vision

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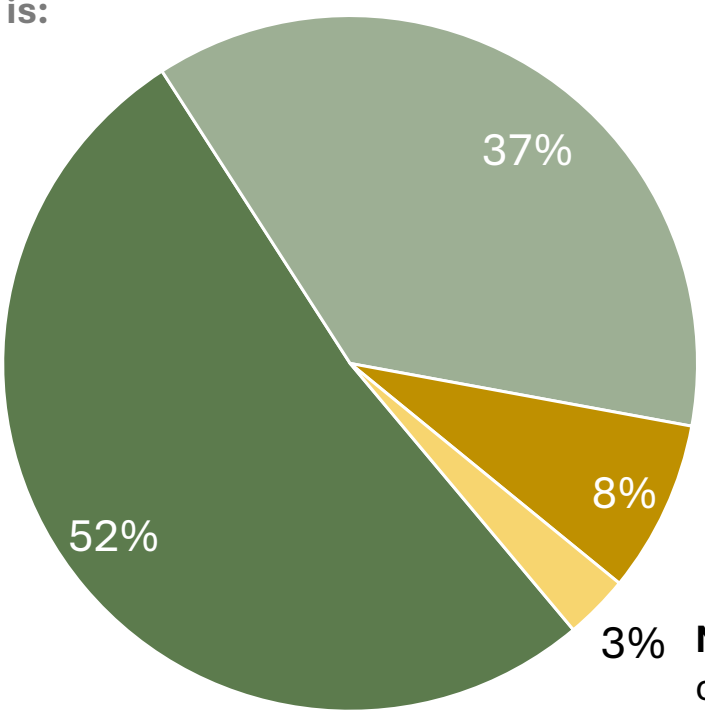
Digging deeper on science funding

Policy for Science

9 out of 10 respondents believe federal investment in **STEM education** is important for future economic prosperity

Percent of respondents who say federal investment in STEM education is:

Very important, there should be significant long-term investment



Important, there should be a good amount of careful (or selective) investment

Limited importance, only small, focused investment is needed

Not needed, businesses will take care of developing these skills on their own

Survey: April 2025

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Policy for Science

All types of STEM education are viewed as important

Percent of respondents who say federal investment in STEM education is at least "somewhat important":

83%
K-12 STEM education

82%
Technical training
(apprenticeships and other career-focused programming)

82%
Undergraduate STEM education
and hands-on training

76%
Advanced degree
(master's or PhD-level) STEM education and hands-on training

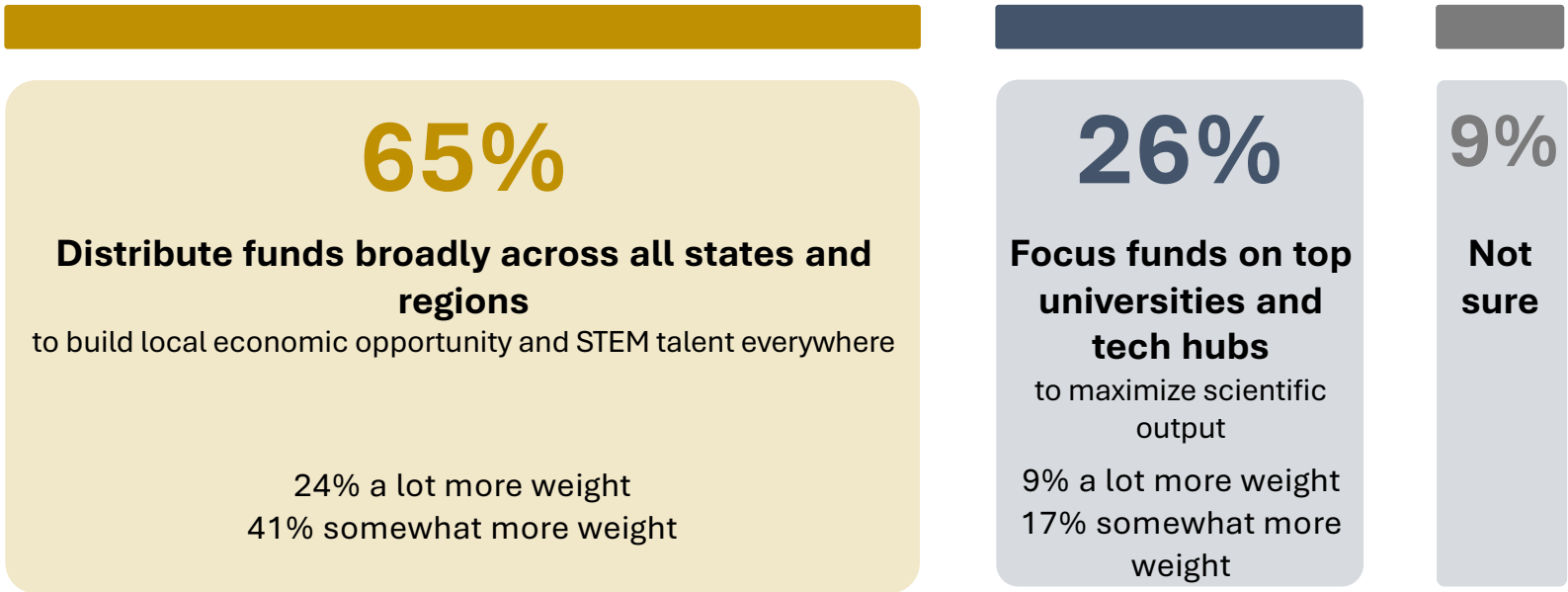
Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

People favor funding that is distributed across states and regions

Percent of respondents who say the following aspects should be **given more weight**:



Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

The public is divided over *who* to invest in, with a slight preference for university-based researchers

Percent of respondent who said the *most* investment should go to ensure the greatest public benefit from new research

31%

Scientists at government labs
who can be more directed towards advancing national priority areas and developing tools used by the entire scientific community

34%

University-based researchers
who have greater freedom to explore new ideas and train the next generation of researchers at the same time

18%

Researchers at companies
who are connected to industries that might apply new scientific knowledge

17%

None of these
– we need to invest in completely new organizations and institutions to ensure the greatest public benefit from new research

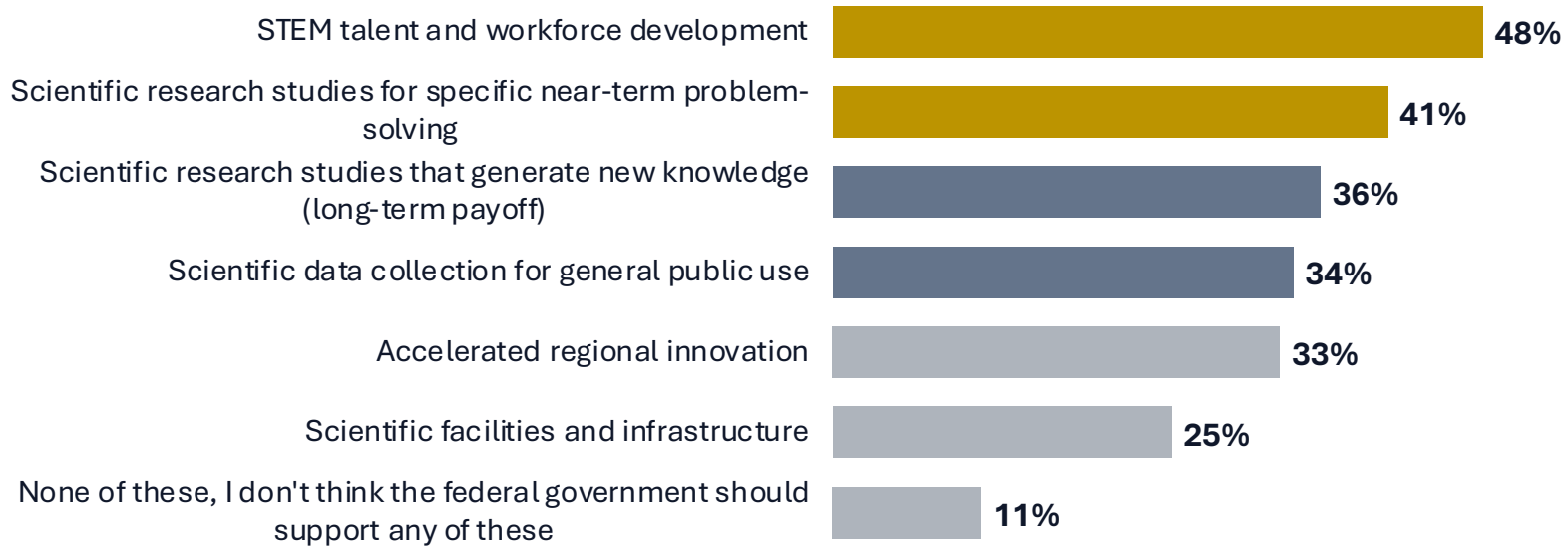
Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

The public supports funding science activities broadly, for the near-and long term, with STEM talent at the top

Percent of respondents who selected the following as **the most important** science and research activities for the federal government to support



Note: Respondents could select up to three answers. Percentages do not sum to 100%

Survey: October 2026

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Policy for Science

Federal investment in science is widely valued, with support for broad and diverse funding

- 9 out of 10 people say federal investment in STEM education is important for future economic prosperity; all types of STEM education, from K-12 to advanced degrees, are seen as important (76-83%)
- Over 6 in 10 people favor funding distributed across states and regions
- The public is divided on who to invest in, with a slight preference for university researchers (34%)
- STEM talent and near-term problem solving top the list of activities to support

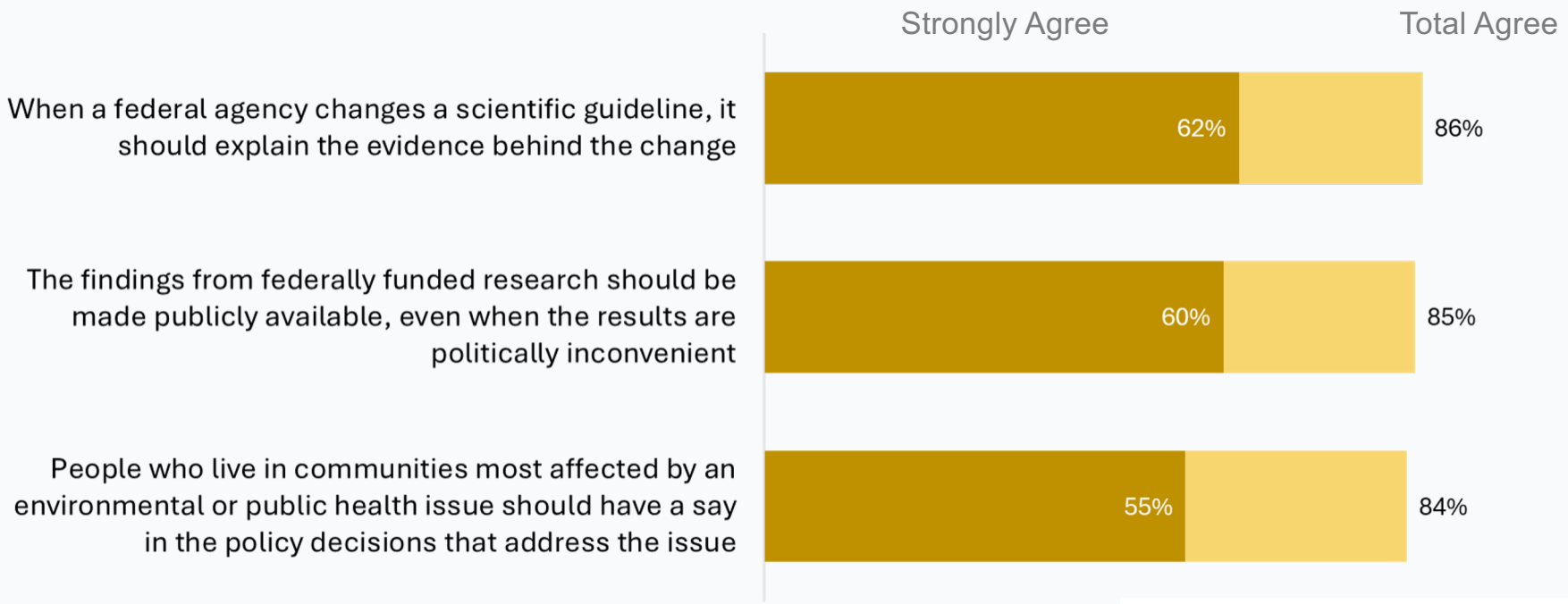
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The demand signal for public participation

Public Participation

Strong agreement on transparency and strong support for the affected public weighing in on science-based policies

Percent of respondents who agree with the following statements:



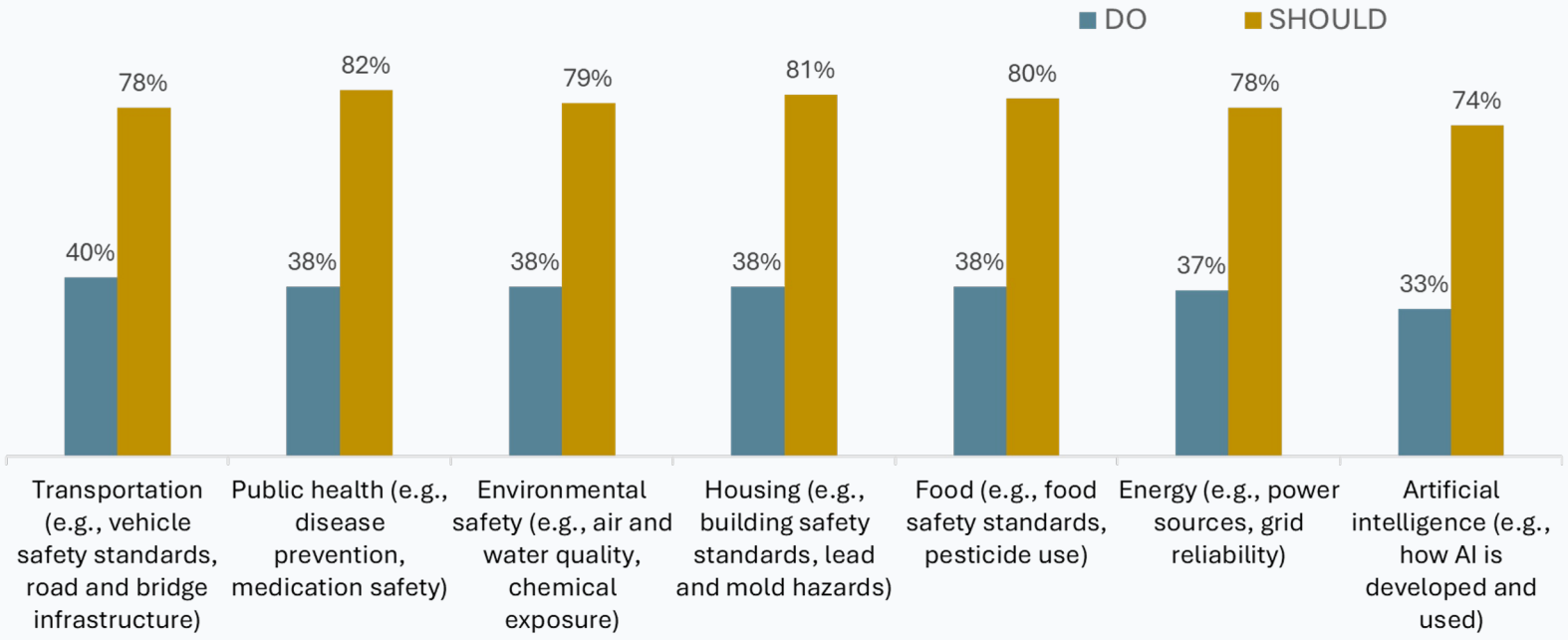
Survey: August 2026

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Public Participation

There is on average a 42-point gap in what sectors the public should vs. do have influence over

Percent of respondents who say people like them DO/SHOULD have the opportunity to influence government decisions:



Survey: August 2026

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Public Participation

Public interest in engaging on issues where science meets society

Percent of respondents who agree with the following statement:

Members of the public should have a say in whether and how new scientific discoveries are introduced in society based on the benefits and downsides of those developments

75%

Somewhat/strongly agree

Survey: August 2026

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Public Participation

Public interest in engaging on issues where science meets society

Percent of respondents who agree with the following statement:

Scientists should participate in activities to learn from the public about how their work affects the average person

82%

Somewhat/strongly agree

Survey: August 2026

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