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Politics is about acting alike, not thinking alike

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I have enjoyed the exchange between Randy Olson and Robert Socolow on the need for effective communication of science, and not simply as a means of conferring content but as a two-way process that builds trust and legitimacy. In my final commentary in this exchange, I'd like to return to discussing Socolow's central claim that science is under attack and needs defending from the anti-science brigades.

In short, I find the evidence for such a claim sorely lacking. In these cynical times, science is among the few institutions in society that is held in high regard. (Others include the military and first responders to disasters.) The most recent [survey](#) of public attitudes about science by the National Science Foundation found that 84 percent of Americans expressed support for government funding of basic research, and Americans have more favorable attitudes toward the promise of science and technology for our future than do Europeans. Further, Americans ranked scientists higher in prestige than 23 other occupations (and at a level similar to firefighters), a view that has remained virtually unchanged in the 35 years that the NSF has conducted its surveys.

These data hardly show an institution under attack or even a loss of support for science. Yet Socolow warns ominously that "an age of darkness could lie ahead" and worries about the "alienation of large segments of the public from the scientific enterprise." I have a hard time making sense of such general expressions of extreme concern, which are by no means unique to our exchange.

As I argued in my first essay in this roundtable, the justification of political actions in terms of science is a common feature of our politics, expressly because science is held in such high regard. Everyone (many scientists included) seems to think that by invoking the scientific correctness of his or her positions, he or she can reach a moral high ground that

will trump the arguments presented by opponents (who, typically, also appeal to science). Science is thus viewed as a way to circumvent political discourse over values and interests.

For instance, we began this exchange with an invitation to respond to a question motivated by the statements made by Republican presidential candidate Rick Perry, who expressed skepticism about the science of climate change. While we've been having this discussion, the Obama administration has decided to overrule the recommendation of an FDA science advisory committee on the safety of an over-the-counter contraceptive for girls under age 17.

While many observers cast both examples as anti-science, neither has anything to do with being anti-science and everything to do with politics and values. For instance, the Obama administration does not want to go into an election year having just made available the so-called morning after pill to 13 year-olds. It is far easier to justify the decision based on appeals to science rather than values. However, the central problem in invoking science as the basis for what are ultimately political decisions is that it risks politicizing the scientific community in pathological ways, especially when the scientific community plays along as a willing participant. Thus, the larger problem that we face these days is not a public that rejects science, but parts of a scientific establishment that at times appear to welcome, if not encourage, the politicization of their own institutions.

The risks are thus not a looming anti-Enlightenment era among the American public, but rather an expert community that is willing to trade on the authority and legitimacy of science in the political battles of the day. Ironically enough, those positing that they are defending science in highly partisan political debates may be helping to reduce its legitimacy in those very same debates.

What is needed from scientists is leadership that is willing to clearly explain that science does not offer political cover for politicians who seek to avoid making difficult decisions by hiding behind science. Instead, there is a need to push such discussions in the direction of the underlying values that are at stake and away from science as a proxy battlefield for those disputes over values. Decisions about climate change and over-the-counter contraceptives (and the like) are ultimately political decisions. They involve considerations of science, but science neither dictates the outcomes of these decisions nor favors one side's values over the other.

As members of the scientific community express their political leanings in public debate, they would do well to remember some sage advice from Walter Lippmann: The goal of politics is not to get everyone to think alike, but instead, to get people who think differently to act alike.