Public Perceptions of Science: Social Science Approach

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How Publics Think

- Most people have limited time and cognitive energy to dedicate to thinking about scientific knowledge.

- Unlike ”interest groups” publics utilize debates and controversies to make distinctions and reify cultural identities.
  - Attitudes toward particular policies, like scientific controversies, are a means of mapping one’s position in society (i.e., the social cartography).

- Science and scientists become intertwined with broad cultural identities, because of the cultural authority of science.
  - its relevance to governance, to bureaucratic authority in the State, secondary socialization (education).

Discourse and the Public Sphere

- Discursive Frames are cultural distinctions that simplify a complex social world.
  - E.g. How to identify allies from adversaries in the political landscape.

- Public Perceptions of Science are about figuring out what frames or schema are in play and what issues are salient.
  - Cognitive frames/schema used to map the social world (i.e., groups, imagined communities).
  - The intensity of resources deployed in the public sphere by engaged groups.

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Why Polarization?

- Political Identity is an evermore prominent means for people to cognitively map the social world

- Cultural Traditionalism – rural v. urban, Conservative Protestant, traditional gender and racial attitudes, older, “authoritarian.”
  - Weaker Force.

- Laissez-Faire Conservatism – bureaucratic authority v. market authority, technical knowledge/cultural capital v. economic capital
  - Stronger Force

Polarization Effects

- Measurement Error: general science attitudes and political identity
- Model that accounts for these issues and controls for Education, Income, Race, and Gender.
- $b = -.429$, $p < .001$
- Moderate negative association; strongest in model.