

## Swedes' confidence in research decreasing?

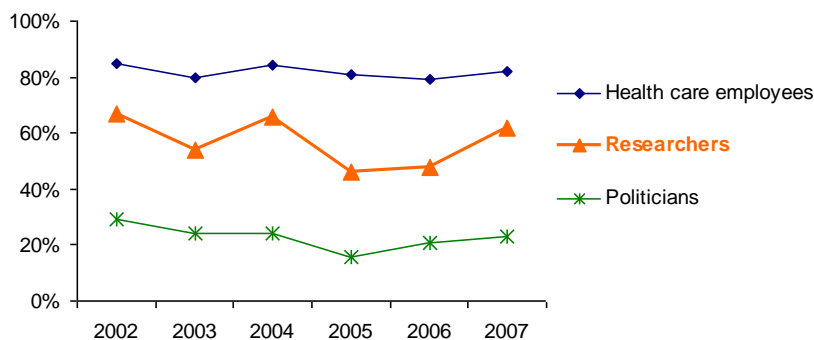
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**Results from attitude surveys conducted over the past few years indicate that confidence in research is declining among Swedes. But there are also indications of an increased level of trust in what can be achieved through research in certain areas, such as climate change and health.**

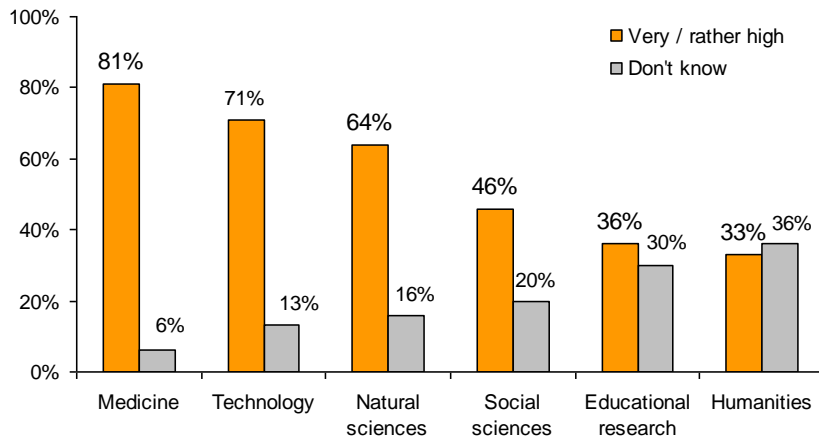
Since 2002, the Swedish association Vetenskap & Allmänhet (Public & Science), VA, has conducted annual telephone interviews (1,000 respondents) and postal surveys (3,000 respondents) with the Swedish public concerning their views of science and researchers. The main objective is to monitor attitudes and trends and compare them with results from other countries, thus revealing the “attitude landscape” and identifying areas where additional communication efforts are needed.

Six out of ten Swedes state in the 2007 postal survey that they have a high or very high level of confidence in the way researchers do their job. This is an increase from the previous measurement, but still lower than a few years ago. The percentage fluctuated quite significantly in the six years during which the surveys were conducted. Interestingly, the number of people with a low level of confidence or giving the response “neither” is stable. There is considerable variation in the number of people who are not sure what they think of researchers. In the 2006 and 2005 surveys over 20 per cent of the respondents had no opinion or said they didn't know, compared to less than 10 per cent in the 2002, 2004 and 2007 surveys. These are the years when confidence levels were higher, see Fig. 1.



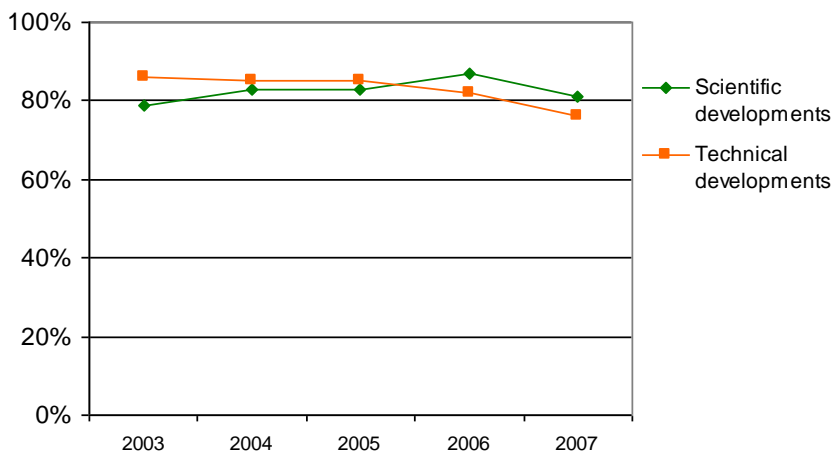
**Figure 1:** Percentage of the Swedish public with a very high or rather high level of confidence in the way different groups do their job.

Despite the recovery of public confidence in researchers that was observed, the levels of confidence in Swedish research within different fields seem to remain on slightly falling or stable curves. The confidence scores differ considerably between research areas, see Fig. 2. Trust in medical research is very high, whereas public opinion of the humanities and educational research is much less positive. However, the number of people with a low or very low level of confidence is almost the same regardless of the research field. The large variation lies in the “don't knows.” Many people simply do not think they know enough about, for example, educational sciences and humanities to be able to have an opinion. Also, more highly educated people tend to have a higher level of confidence in research and researchers.



**Figure 2:** How much confidence do you have in Swedish research within the following fields? Percentages, 2007.

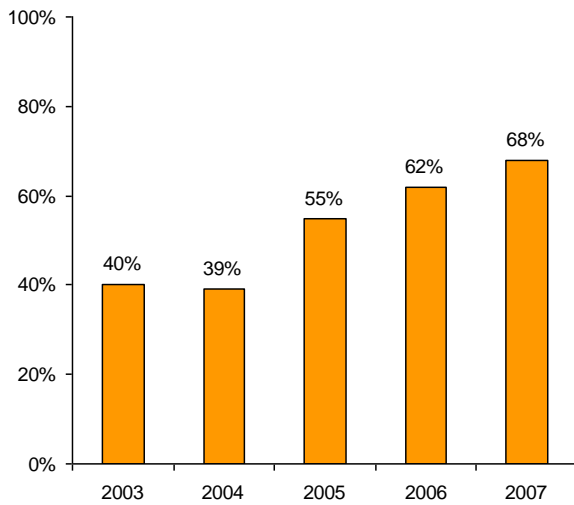
Another sign of falling levels of confidence in research is that a decreasing number of people think that technical developments have made life better for ordinary people. In the 1970s and 1980s, a time of massive debate about nuclear power and environmental threats, the percentages were even lower, in the range of 60 to 70 per cent. “Technology optimism” then increased during the 1990s, and reached values well above 80 per cent after the millennium. But since VA started measuring this in 2003, the numbers have started to decrease and in 2007 were down to 76 per cent.



**Figure 3:** Do you think that the ... during the past 10 to 20 years have made life better or worse for ordinary people? Percentage answering “much better” or “somewhat better.”

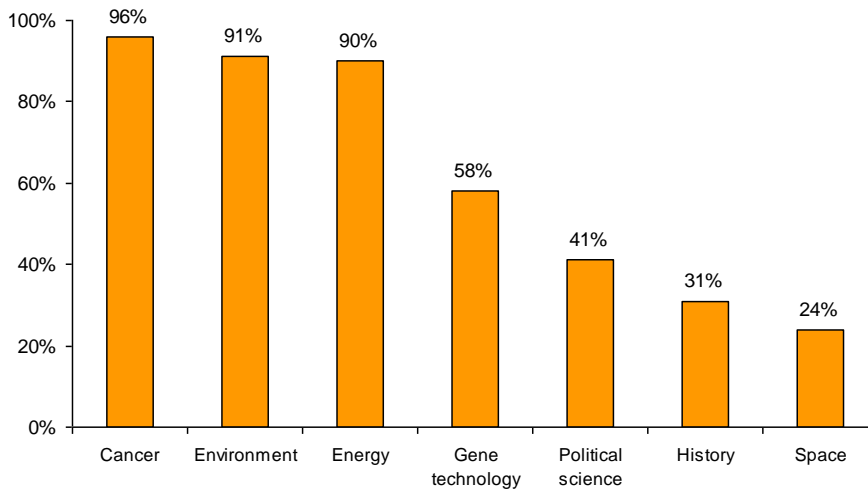
The number of Swedes who agree that *scientific* developments over the past few decades have made life better for ordinary people reached a maximum in 2006, but decreased in 2007. It remains to be seen if this is just a temporary decline. Women and young people have slightly lower levels of confidence in the benefits offered by scientific developments than men.

In contrast to these findings, there is a marked increase in the number of people believing that there is a good chance research will help slow down climate change within ten years – from 40 per cent in 2003 to almost 70 per cent in 2007. Sweden had a severe storm in January 2005, shortly after the tsunami in December 2004. In August 2005 Hurricane Katrina struck. Around that time, media reporting about climate change started to accelerate. Judging by the survey results, so did public awareness, concern and hopes for technical or scientific solutions.



**Figure 4:** Do you think there is a good chance that research will help to slow climate change within ten years? (Percentage answering **yes**)

A correlation exists between public confidence in research and support for public funding of research. Accordingly, the public's willingness to spend tax payers' money on research is lower in several areas. Research into the environment and energy are two exceptions for which slightly increased figures, from an already very high level, are observed. More than nine out of ten Swedes want the Government to spend money on world-class research into these fields. Also very popular is medical research, such as cancer research, which is supported by almost everyone. In contrast, we see a decline in support for areas such as gene technology and space research – despite the fact that the Swedes recently very proudly watched space walks by the country's first astronaut.



**Figure 5:** How important do you think it is for Sweden to spend money on world-class research within the following areas? Percentage answering very or rather important, 2007.

There are probably several reasons for the trends observed. Alarmist reports and fraud are often mentioned in open survey questions about possible reasons for a loss of confidence in researchers. In addition, many respondents express frustration over scientists expressing different opinions, for instance on climate change. On the other hand, the extensive media reporting and debate about climate change may also instil greater hope and trust in what science and researchers can do to help.

The decline observed in confidence in technological developments – which may be translated into an increased “technology scepticism” – is possibly caused by an increasing awareness of the causes and effects of environmental damage and climate change. However, there is also significant and stable support for research into areas such as the environment and energy sources, as well as an increasing trust in researchers’ abilities to do something about climate change.

The results presented in this paper indicate that there is a high level of confidence in and support for research within areas that people know about and issues that affect them in their daily lives.