

Politics & Science in Sweden

VA Report 2006:5

Facts about the study



For me, it isn't a hockey match that we are playing, but music, and that should be played together.

Margareta Norell
Bergendahl, Professor
Royal Institute of
Technology

Politicians can greatly influence the public's attitude to science. It matters greatly how politicians view knowledge, science and science's role in society. An active dialogue between politicians and researchers is essential and the success or otherwise of the interaction between the two groups can have a far-reaching impact. For these reasons, the Swedish organisation Vetenskap & Allmänhet (Public and Science) has carried out a three-part study into the relationship between politicians and researchers:

- 595 members of parliament, leading regional politicians and members of Stockholm City Council were interviewed by Synovate Temo in April 2006 (VA-report 2006:2 Politicians' view of science).
- An analysis was carried out into the science-related material in a selection of publications from parliamentary political parties and their youth organizations aimed specifically at the party membership. The analysis covered the extent of scientific reporting, subjects covered and how the material was presented. (VA-report 2006:3 Science in the Political Press).
- A collection of in-depth essays and interviews was commissioned and published. Nine researchers and nine politicians discuss how they see the relationship between researchers and politicians. (VA-report 2006:4 *Kunskapsbiten, 18 röster om relationen forskare – politiker*).

A summary of the study Politics and Science (VA-report 2006:5) will be presented here. It is hoped that these results will stimulate politicians to ask questions about science and also intensify the dialogue between researchers, politicians and the public.

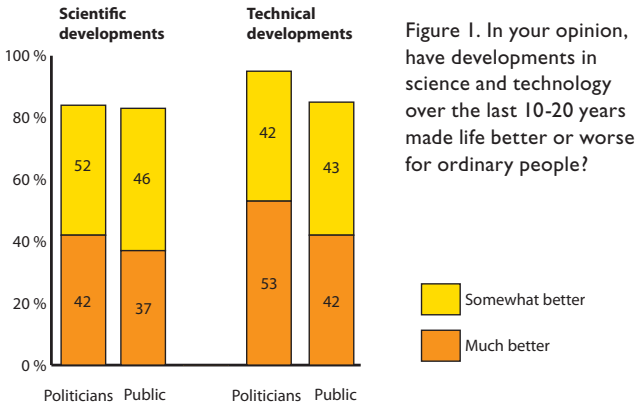
These studies have been carried out with the support of Forskningsrådet Formas, KK-stiftelsen, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Vetenskapsrådet and VINNOVA. Readers are welcome to quote from these studies providing they cite VA as the source. These and other VA studies can also be downloaded from www.v-a.se.

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Politicians believe in research

Politicians are very positively inclined towards research. They think that scientific and technological developments have made life better – and they are generally more positive than the general public.



There is an extraordinary power in research that we must have the courage to release, rather than to contain.

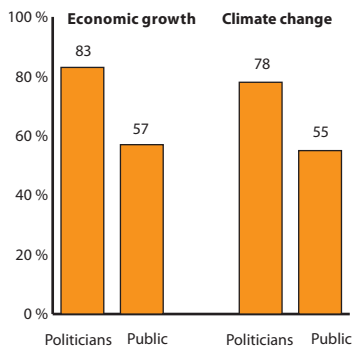
Hasse Johansson, Group Vice President and Head of R&D, Scania.

All the money in the bank can't get us back a stable climate.

Anders Wijkman, MEP (Christian Democrats)

Politicians also strongly believe that research can have beneficial consequences. For example, they believe to a greater extent than the public that research can contribute to improved economic growth. This is particularly true for members of parliament from right-of-centre parties.*

Figure 2. Do you think that, within the next ten years, there is a good chance that research will contribute to the following?
 - increased economic growth in Sweden?
 - slowing down climate change?



*
Left-of-centre parties:
 Socialdemokraterna, Vänsterpartiet, Miljöpartiet
Right-of-centre parties:
 Moderaterna, Folkpartiet, Centerpartiet, Kristdemokraterna

Politicians are also more optimistic than the public when it comes to the potential of research to contribute to slowing down climate change.

Politicians trust researchers



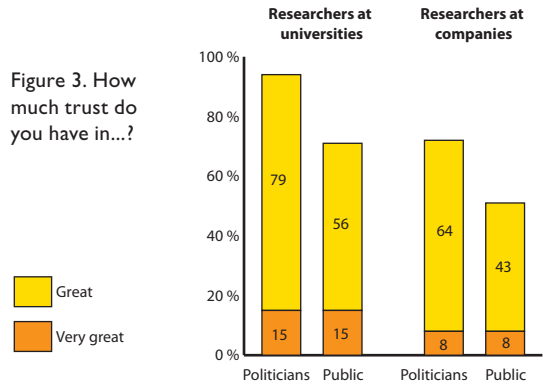
There is a lack of knowledge amongst researchers when it comes to how the democratic process works and how much time it takes.

Per Bill, MP (Moderaterna)

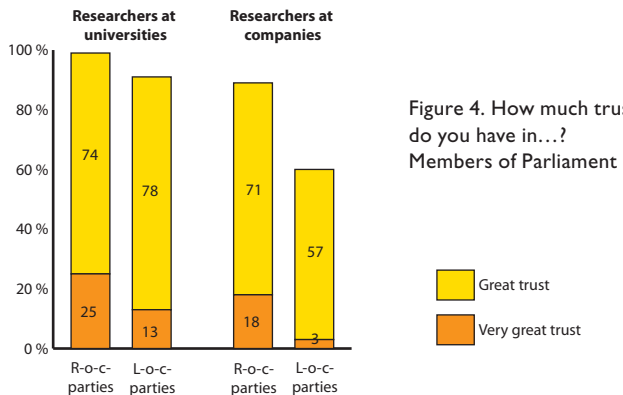
For me, it is much more important to make a contribution to society than to write an article for a scientific publication.

Lars Lindqvist, Professor Kalmar University College

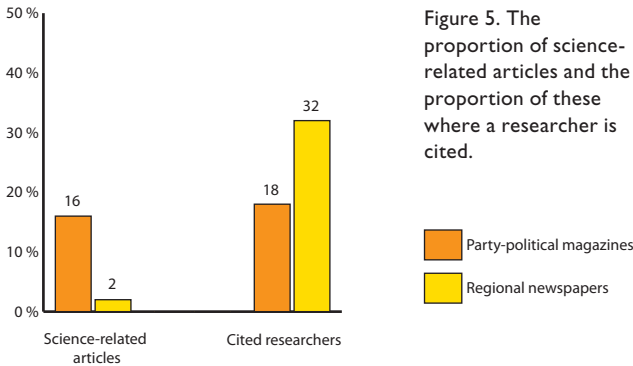
Politicians have a very positive view of researchers. Very few consider that researchers carry out research without considering the risks, or that they have power that makes them dangerous. This high trust that politicians have for researchers applies mainly to researchers at universities – the level of trust is lower for researchers at companies. But politicians have a considerably higher level of trust than the general public in both types of researchers.



Right-of-centre politicians have a significantly higher level of trust in researchers, and especially for those at companies, than politicians from left-of-centre parties.

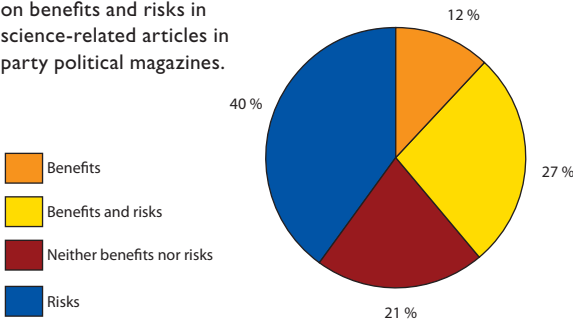


Even though politicians have a very high level of trust in researchers and research, researchers do not feature very highly in political party magazines or in those of their respective youth organizations. Whilst there is substantially more science-related material in political party magazines compared to regional newspapers (analysed by VA in 2005), the proportion of articles where a researcher is cited is considerably lower.



Science-related articles in party-political magazines tend to emphasize the associated risks rather than the benefits, although there are a relatively large number of articles where both risks and benefits are illustrated.

Figure 6. The emphasis on benefits and risks in science-related articles in party political magazines.



The vast majority of politicians say they often have contact with researchers and that their experiences of these contacts are positive. Negative experiences were mainly connected to difficulties communicating with researchers who have their own language and live in their own world.



When scientists use language such as “on the one hand this, on the other hand that” to explain research, politicians interpret this as contradictory and unreliable.

*Jan Hjärpe, Professor
Lund University*

How do research results affect policy?



It is of course the case that we all appreciate research that supports what we already believe.

Ulf Kristersson, Regional politician, (Moderaterna), Strängnäs

A state-financed researcher works in the interest of the tax payer. Researchers should bear this in mind.

Christian Azar, Professor Chalmers University of Technology

Which policy areas are most influenced by research results? Health and health care policies as well as energy and the environment, say the politicians. Social and industrial policy areas are influenced by research to a notably lesser extent.

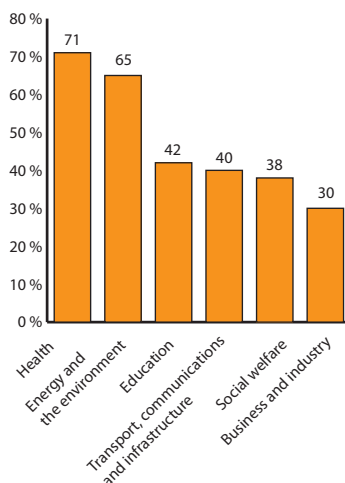


Figure 7. How much do research results influence policy in the following areas? Great/very great influence.

Politicians also consider that medical research has the greatest influence on societal development. Social sciences and the humanities are thought to be much less influential in this respect.

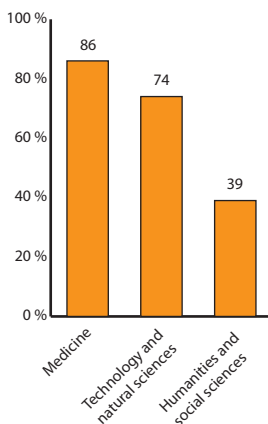


Figure 8. How much influence do you think the following research areas have on questions of societal development? Great/very great.

What type of research most affects political policy? It is not, as might be expected, natural science, technology or medicine. Instead, it is the social sciences and humanities that politicians say form the basis of policy proposals.

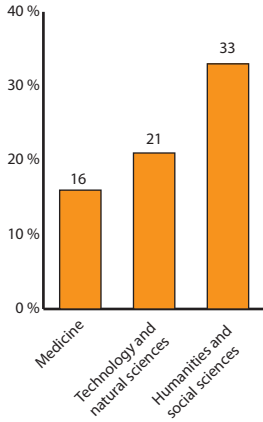
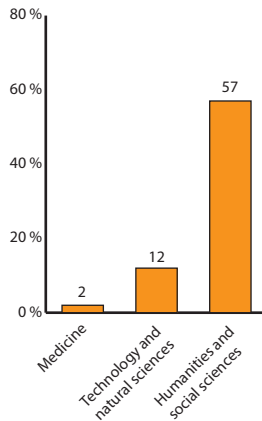


Figure 9. How often do you use research results from the following subject areas as a basis for a policy proposals? Often/very often.

This pattern is repeated in the parties' own magazines. In the science-related articles, medicine is rarely covered, whereas the social sciences and humanities are often reported.

Figure 10. Subject areas of science-related articles in party-political magazines.



In the analysis of regional, youth and family publications carried out by VA in 2005, medicine was clearly the most common subject area reported. This probably reflects the fact that medicine is a subject which is relevant to people in their daily lives.



If the government doesn't want any scientific advice then I'm not going to force them to take it.
Sten Levander, Professor Lund University/MAS

Far too often, research results have been misinterpreted and distorted in order to support a particular political standpoint.
Erik Nilsson, Stockholm City Council (Social Democrats)

What kind of social science research is used by the politicians? Macro-economics would be a reasonable guess, but politicians, especially those on the 'Left' don't regard macro-economics as a particularly scientific subject.

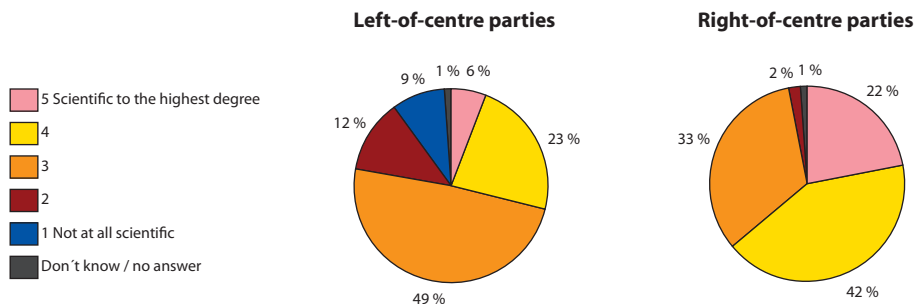


Figure 11. To what extent do you consider macro-economics to be scientific? Members of Parliament.

In order to gauge the level of knowledge about science, politicians were asked to judge how scientific a range of different subjects are. Politicians regard medicine as being the most scientific subject, followed by chemistry and material science, precisely like the general public. Macro-economics and philosophy came out somewhat lower.

Just under a fifth of politicians judge astrology to be either very scientific or scientific to the highest degree, which is about the same proportion as with the general public. Only a half considered astrology to be not at all scientific.



Strong, overly-detailed political control of research has developed in Sweden, particularly within the social sciences.

Bo Rothstein, Professor Gothenburg University

More meeting places needed

The participants' thoughts in the book *Kunskapsbiten* and the politicians' replies in the telephone interviews all indicate that researchers and politicians live in different worlds, speak different languages and have different perspectives.

The same conclusions can be drawn from other studies carried out in different countries. Many reports discuss two different cultures and the difficulties involved in understanding each others' points of view.

What researchers and politicians need are more meeting places, new and different ways of interacting, more contact and dialogue, and easy to digest summaries of research information. Together these measures can help to drive the two worlds closer, and to make research easier for politicians to access and understand.

There should be absolutely no steering of science, but dialogue and clear boundaries.

Ana Maria Narti,
MP (Folkpartiet)

It is politicians lacking sufficient objective information who are making decisions about our laws.

Carl Schlyter, MEP
(Miljöpartiet)

I did very much want to meet with national politicians, preferably those in government, to discuss the importance of basic research, but it didn't happen.

Helena Edlund, Professor
Umeå University



We need to create a forum where not only can research results be communicated, but where interest in the research process itself can be generated – i.e. an interest in the way a researcher thinks.

Britt-Marie Danestig, MP
(Vänsterpartiet)

Better research information



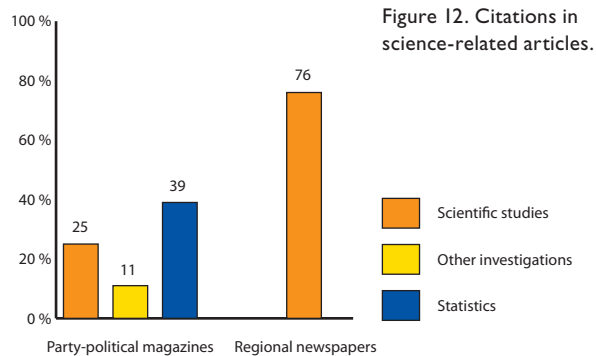
It surprises me that people do not actively make use of good research results, in particular within the regions and government departments. They are an obvious bank of ideas.

Lena Ek, MEP
(Centerpartiet)

Two thirds of politicians, and nearly nine out of ten members of parliament, have actively searched for information on science and research during the last 12 months. To a large extent they all found what they were looking for but based on their experiences, they would like to see simple, short summaries of research. In many international studies, the need for easy-to-read summaries of relevant research information has also been highlighted.

But politicians do not want information in the form of so-called alarmist reports – seven out of ten politicians believe that too many are published.

The analysis of party political magazines and those of their youth organizations show that academic scientific research is referenced less often than in regional newspapers, and also less often than statistical material and other non-academic investigations from other sources.



Statistics satisfy the politicians' demand for short and direct information, whereas scientific reports often contain both uncertainties and alternative interpretations – which can be difficult for politicians to deal with.

Involve the public!

Three out of ten politicians think that researchers do not communicate sufficiently with the public about their research. Politicians are more satisfied with researchers' cooperation with for example industry, which can make practical use of research results.

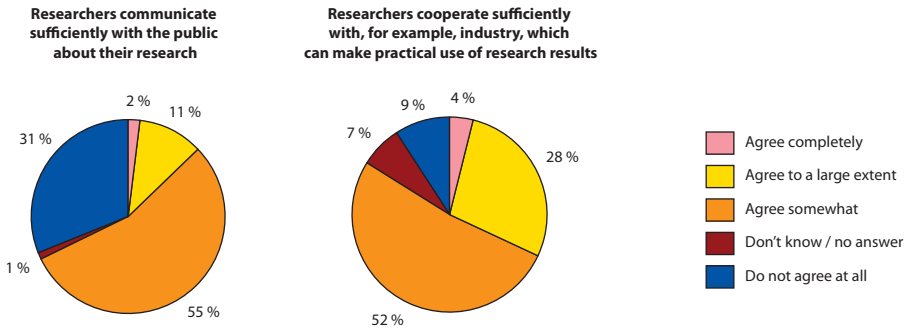


Figure 13. How politicians view researchers' interaction with the outside world.

In the book "Kunskapsbiten" there are also clear indications that dialogue with the public is important. The public are of course also the voters, and therefore a way through which to reach and influence politicians.

Other studies also highlight the importance of the research community beginning dialogue with the public at an early stage, so ensuring that politicians will be influenced by research results. Science never decides political issues on its own, but is instead seen by politicians as one source among many. Public opinion is also one important source for politicians.



Researchers should not only talk to the public, but should also listen to the public and their comments.

Lena Hjelm-Wallén, ex-foreign minister (Social Democrats)

Vetenskap & Allmänhet, VA (Public and Science), is a Swedish association aimed at promoting dialogue, openness and trust between the public – especially the young – and researchers. It endeavours to stimulate greater dialogue around issues that concern people, and to connect these issues to science.

The association was founded in 2002 and uses three main approaches to achieve its goals:

Knowledge

We conduct surveys and studies on how the public views research, how researchers view dialogue and what specific groups of society think about science.

Dialogue

We organize and encourage meetings in new and unconventional arenas where researchers and the public can hold dialogues based on what the public is interested in.

Experience

We spread our experience of various and diverse activities, organised both by ourselves and others, via our network and our website.

VA has 50 member organizations and is financed through membership subscriptions, funding for specific projects and a grant from the Ministry of Education and Culture. More information can be found online at www.v-a.se.



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