The Public's Science—A New Social Contract for American Research Policy

Rapporteur Report of the December 2025 Workshop

Introduction

In July 2025, the Science & Justice Research Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the Science, Technology, and Social Values Lab at the Institute for Advanced Study launched *The Public's Science—A New Social Contract for American Research Policy*. This initiative seeks to develop the scholarship and multiperspectival policy insights necessary for reimagining American research policy around the aspirations for public science—a research ecosystem oriented toward excellence, justice, transparency, and democratic participation that serves not only the nation's interests but also the many different publics who sustain and are affected by the scientific enterprise.

In December 2025, more than forty participants with diverse expertise and experience convened at the Institute for Advanced Study to launch the initiative. Participants approached questions of research policy from multiple disciplinary perspectives—including sociology, history of science, science and technology studies, law, and policy studies—and engaged in vigorous debate about how to chart a public-spirited vision for American research and innovation.

This report synthesizes workshop discussions around five central themes. Workshop sessions revisited the formation of the American science ecosystem, exploring how its enduring tensions might be addressed through new mechanisms for public accountability and changes in how research is funded, incentivized, and evaluated. Other sessions grappled with the need for more democratic and just participation given histories of harm and exclusion, proposing new pathways for fostering innovation toward social good. Discussions concluded with reflection on cross-cutting insights and emerging questions for future work. The workshop papers will be further developed for publication in a special issue of *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. These contributions will also inform future efforts of the initiative, including the development of policy frameworks to advance public science.

Framing the Crises: The Public's Science and the Fraying Social Contract

American science is in the midst of converging crises. Trust in science has fractured in recent years. Federal funding of research is shrinking in amount and increasing in volatility, with often abrupt cuts that serve to suppress certain lines of inquiry—such as health equity or climate change research—more than others. Government decision-making increasingly sidelines scientific expertise. Government science agencies are being gutted and appear to have diminishing scientific independence, integrity, and credibility. These developments are alarming and represent a fraying of the American "social contract" for science: a prevailing policy paradigm, emerging after World War II, in which the federal government invests in science at scale through scientist-led government agencies like the National Science Foundation that largely defer to scientist-administrators to decide how science is funded, conducted, and vetted. These crises converge around a fundamental question: who decides what knowledge matters, and for whom? When the stability of research institutions cannot be taken for granted, when funding mechanisms are contested, and when trust varies dramatically across publics, the postwar assumption that scientific autonomy naturally serves the public interest demands reexamination.

Workshop participants offered diagnoses of how we arrived at this moment of crisis in science, analyzing the social and political forces that have destabilized the postwar social contract. For some, this crisis has been shaped by the relatively recent loss of cross-party agreement that scientific expertise should play a significant role in government decision-making. Science faces problems of trust, especially across lines of political or social difference. State actors and social movements have disputed and disrupted the authority of professional experts and classes. For example, the authority of public health experts during the COVID-19 pandemic response faced challenges from multiple directions. Members of the political elite dismissed scientific recommendations. Conservative social movements mobilized against public health measures. Communities disproportionately impacted by both the pandemic and responses to it questioned whether expert guidance adequately addressed their concerns. This multi-directional contestation reveals how scientific authority fractures differently across various publics, not simply between "pro-science" and "anti-science" camps.

Additionally, past efforts to make science and its use in government more accountable and

participatory are currently being weaponized to undermine science and public accountability. While much of the meeting's discussion focused on the problems facing the American scientific ecosystem, some participants noted that many of these problems are not specific to it. They argued that erosion of democracy, general distrust of institutions, and the lack of robust mechanisms for public participation and accountability are larger problems requiring broader systemic change.

In addition to articulating how we arrived at the current moment, participants discussed where to go moving forward. This, they agreed, will require answering the question of where and how science fits into a multiracial democracy and demands for justice, a question that has become harder to address in the current era of populist politics and significant public frustration with institutions involved in science (e.g., federal agencies, corporations, and universities). Much of this discussion extended beyond how to bolster federal funding, exploring how to build shared trust, develop new democratic institutions, reassess the relationship between partisan politics and scientific institutions, and restore science as a source of shared hope and pride.

Funding The Public's Science: Beyond Private Interest

American science operates within a distinctive political economy shaped by public funding, private industry investment, and philanthropic support. As industry R&D has grown and federal investment as share of GDP has declined, questions have emerged about how funding structures shape research priorities, who benefits from publicly supported science, and whether current arrangements serve public interests.

Workshop participants examined how science funding is inextricable from local, national, and global economies. Discussions underscored that the predominance of market logics in R&D has led to private interests being prioritized over public ones. Market-oriented pathways to realizing the benefits of science—especially those tied to patents and commercialization—were critiqued for incentivizing novelty and economic gain over affordability, long-term maintenance of existing technologies, and addressing social issues like inequality. Participants also emphasized that the dominance of industry in developing emerging technologies, such as AI, makes research agendas more responsive to market speculation than to social needs. In pharmaceutical research and development, deep reliance on public funding coexists with failure to deliver affordable

products. Rising drug prices, patent protections, and corporate expectations for increased profits undermine fair returns on public investment. The financial structure of higher education also drew scrutiny, including deep cuts to government funding of academic institutions and concerns that profit motives are overshadowing the public mission of universities.

While most publicly-funded research is supported through government contracts, workshop participants noted that contracts are not well suited to settle debates over what research serves the public interest. These contracts also make it relatively easy to abruptly cancel funding when politically expedient. Participants proposed alternative models organized around three ideas:

1. democratizing priority-setting through participatory approaches that give affected communities a genuine voice in research agendas
2. creating non-market translation pathways with shared ownership structures that center community needs rather than commercial viability, such as requiring that publicly-funded pharmaceutical research result in affordable medicines
3. strategically pooling philanthropic, industry, and public funding to support projects viable only with cross-sectoral investment, such as requiring AI companies to fund basic research alongside federal agencies

Participants also raised important concerns about these alternatives. Some noted risks of granting excessive power to industry actors even within public-interest frameworks. Others highlighted the global implications of disruptions to science funding in the United States and the need to critically consider the U.S. military's role in shaping research priorities. These cautions underscore that reimagining science funding requires attending to power dynamics across multiple scales—from how individual grants are structured to how funding flows shape global knowledge production.

Building Accountability into The Public's Science

How is science governed and by whom? At the workshop, participants discussed persistent tensions between scientific autonomy, broader democratic oversight, and the desire of powerful actors to control the course of research and development. The group's discussion highlighted how existing accountability mechanisms in science—from evaluation systems in open science to

research security policy—too often advance narrow scientific, political, or economic interests rather than serve broader public interests.

Participants noted that processes of accountability are frequently designed to balance competing elite constituencies, such as national security, industry, and scientific communities, while leaving the public with only indirect and weak roles in governing science. At the same time, participants cautioned that participatory models of governance can reproduce inequalities if not carefully designed. Some segments of the public—especially those that are well-resourced or allied with powerful actors—may gain greater power over others through participatory governance mechanisms. For example, members of the public who rally around the federal agenda to "Make America Healthy Again"—including critics of childhood vaccination and proponents of alternative medicine—are more likely to be called upon to shape federal science and health policy today than other constituencies, such as advocates for LGBTQ health equity or climate change activists.

Thus, democratic and participatory modes of governance may offer only a veneer of public accountability. For instance, one participant emphasized how tech companies at times seek input from the public through a strategy known as "participatory value alignment." Often this merely entails large-scale polling of consumer preferences about easily tweakable product features rather than more consequential decisions such as how to responsibly scale up AI infrastructures. Both the democratic accountability and independence of publicly-funded science face erosion as powerful political and economic interests increasingly shape research agendas. These examples underscore that "public participation" and "democratic accountability" are not self-executing—the mechanisms matter. Genuine accountability over research priorities and resources requires not just consultation but shared decision-making power, not just transparency but enforceability, not just representation but redistribution of authority.

Participants identified tradeoffs between insulating science from these forces and creating stronger forms of democratic control. They debated what institutional arrangements are needed to enable meaningful public input in science, uphold scientific rigor, and pursue knowledge that may challenge popular beliefs or political agendas. They proposed alternative, more accountable

governance models, including ones that grant non-scientific groups legal recourse to oversee research that involves their communities.

Constituting the Public

Science and science policy have historically been exclusionary domains, shaped by dynamics of race, gender, class, religion, and other inequalities and differences. A key theme of discussion at the workshop focused on how science has both harmed and excluded marginalized communities, while also highlighting visions for more democratic and just participation in research and policymaking. Participants discussed pathways toward more democratic participation while grappling with hard questions about harm, justice, recognition, and the challenges of building public science in a deeply stratified society.

Many participants emphasized how communities historically excluded from the scientific workforce have nonetheless created alternative pathways of knowledge production outside or at the edges of elite scientific institutions. One participant highlighted how African American intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells developed a tradition of rigorous inquiry that contested the exclusionary nature of the scientific enterprise while reimagining how knowledge production can advance justice. Others described how the formation and intertwining of social movements, community networks, and new networks of researchers—such as in the reproductive justice movement—have challenged the exclusionary aspects of science. One strategy for advancing the public's science is to identify, learn from, and uplift such efforts.

During the workshop, people also noted that many who engage in public-spirited inquiry are not fully recognized as experts or are undervalued within hierarchies of expertise. Participants raised the example of how social scientists, journalists, and activists can produce innovative research meant to serve the public interest, yet they are less likely to be recognized as experts. Finally, participants noted a misalignment between aspirations for expansive public participation and existing research infrastructures, prompting discussion of how scientific institutions can more robustly support community-driven and collaborative research.

Forging the Public's Science

A persistent challenge in science policy is how to ensure research findings ultimately benefit broad segments of society. Workshop participants questioned dominant models of research translation that use narrow definitions of impact like the creation of marketable products. In addition, they reflected on how translation processes might be reimagined to better align scientific work with public needs and values.

Participants identified several structural shortcomings. Weak links between researchers and the government limit the use of quality evidence in policymaking. In parallel, gaps in scientific training leave researchers poorly prepared to respond to ethical issues and to communicate with the public. Conditions like these perpetuate disconnects between science, the government, and the public, preventing meaningful exchanges among the various parties about how to maximize the positive public impact of research.

Participants proposed infrastructure investments spanning immediate reforms and transformative changes:

- expanding in-house policy research capacity within local governments to strengthen research-policy connections
- reforming graduate STEM education to prioritize communication, community engagement, and coalition-building
- coordinating funding across federal, philanthropic, and industry sectors to support work that serves public rather than market priorities

Most fundamentally, participants called for institutional and cultural changes that center equity, incentivize public accountability, and foster shared understanding of science's purpose.

Concluding Discussion

At the conclusion of the workshop, discussion among participants returned to the many converging crises facing science in the United States today. Taking a step back to consider broader sociopolitical currents, participants reflected upon the relationship between the future of American science policy and ongoing threats to democracy, the erosion of academic freedom, and political animus directed at universities. While the postwar social contract positioned elite

universities as the main place for conducting publicly-funded research, participants underscored that efforts to advance the public's science should consider how science can be institutionalized more broadly throughout society. This more expansive ecology could include local governments as hubs of research and better distribute opportunities for scientific inquiry and innovation across geographic regions.

Participants also emphasized the need for a positive, forward-looking vision for science and technology. What are the guiding values that science policy should espouse? What are the concrete public benefits that it should strive for? What would success look like for the public's science?

Participants articulated what success might look like:

- research agendas directly responsive to the needs of communities with high degrees of experimental-subject or disease burden
- accountability mechanisms with teeth, not just performative consultation
- benefits distributed broadly rather than concentrated among elites
- science that inspires not just economic growth but also wonder, connection, and shared hope

This vision requires imagination—not limiting public science to instrumental goals but embracing its capacity to foster democratic culture.

The Public's Science workshop facilitated rigorous critique and collective reimagining of American science policy. At a moment when many are concerned for the future of science in the United States, participants offered not just diagnosis but vision: a research ecosystem oriented toward excellence, justice, transparency, and democratic participation. This requires institutional transformation—broadening the settings where research happens to include not just elite universities but also local governments and community organizations, reconsidering how research agendas are set to be more responsive to public needs, and reenvisioning how government agencies can intertwine scientific integrity with democratic accountability.

Participants will reconvene in spring 2026 to expand these discussions and develop papers for an open-access special issue of *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social*

Science. The work ahead is both scholarly and political: building the frameworks, narratives, and institutional models for a science policy that resonates with and reflects the aspirations of diverse publics.