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Public S&T Assessments in U.S. More Positive Than in Other Nations

Researchers in the United States have been measuring the adult public's attitudes toward science and technology (S&T) since 1979. These measures, regularly reported in the National Science Board's *Science & Engineering Indicators* series, help illustrate relationships among U.S. S&T activities and investments and the society within which they take place.

The time series data show that the U.S. public views positively the effects of science and technology on their own daily lives. Between 1979 and 1990, at least four-fifths of adults over 18 agreed that science and technology make "our lives healthier, easier, and more comfortable." The surveys also showed that over two-thirds of the public think that

- It is important to know about science in daily life;
- Scientific knowledge is understandable if explained clearly;
- Scientists want to improve life for the average person; and
- Government should support research even if it brings no immediate benefits.

Recent international comparisons. In the late 1980s Japan, Canada, and the 12 nations of the European Community (EC) began to survey attitudes toward science and technology. By asking some of the same questions as in the U.S. survey, data became available for comparing the responses of national populations on the basis of some of the traditional U.S. measures. It became clear that the consistently positive attitudes of the U.S. public toward science and technology are unique among Western democracies and Japan.¹ In the United States, strongly positive attitudes toward science and technology have traditionally been directly related to

respondents' levels of education, whereas in some EC countries with high levels of development and education, surprisingly large percentages of respondents seem to distrust some aspects of science and technology.

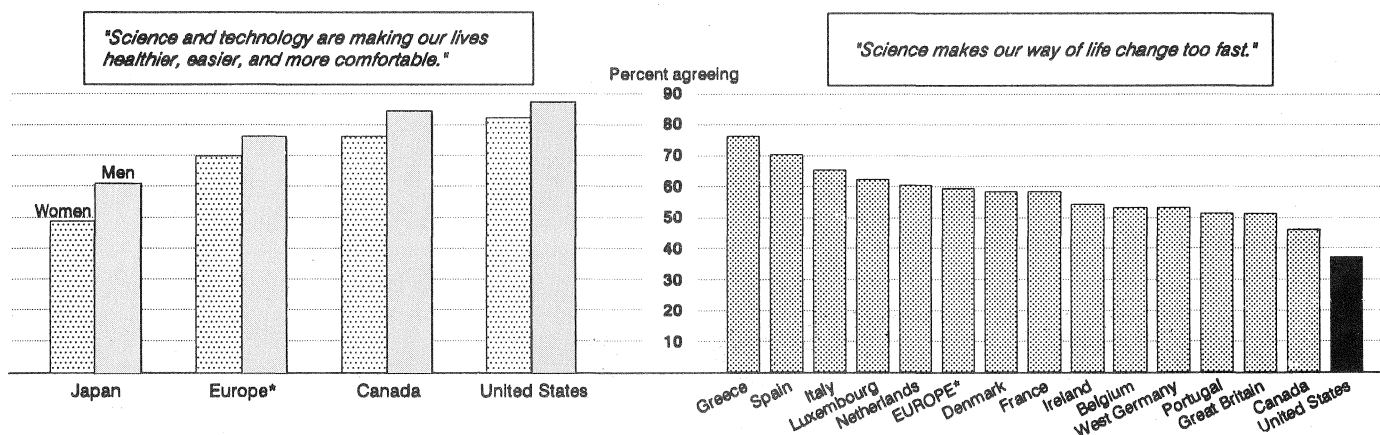
Only 28 percent of Dutch respondents agree that "the benefits of science are greater than any harmful effects," compared with 76 percent in the United States. Fifty-three percent of (former) West German respondents support government funding of basic research compared with 80 percent in the United States. And as shown in the chart, majorities of respondents in all EC nations agree with the statement that "science makes our way of life change too fast," compared with less than 40 percent of U.S. adults.

Language and other cultural differences between Japan and Western countries complicate comparisons, but data are accumulating that indicate less positive public evaluation of science and technology in Japan than in the United States. Women, who have traditionally shown somewhat less positive attitudes toward science and technology in all of the national surveys, in Japan seem particularly doubtful about the personal benefits of science and technology. The chart shows that 61 percent of male respondents, compared with only 49 percent of female respondents, agreed with the proposition that science and technology make lives healthier, easier, and more comfortable. Among Japanese women, 34 percent rejected the proposition outright, compared with 9 percent in Europe, 15 in the United States, and 19 in Canada.

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¹Comparisons on all of the available measures are discussed in *Science & Engineering Indicators 1991* (NSB 91-1).

Public attitudes toward science and technology



Europe stands for the member nations of the Commission of the European Communities (EC), listed under the bars on the right.

SOURCE: National Science Foundation, SRS.