

Press release

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ESMT Berlin study shows how citizens evaluate scientific research proposals

New research by ESMT Berlin and Politecnico di Milano explores how non-experts assess scientific research proposals and reveals key implications for public participation in science funding. The study shows that while citizens value both social impact and scientific merit, their judgments can be shaped by personal interests, income, and education.

The paper, published in *Research Policy*, is co-authored by Henry Sauermann (ESMT Berlin), Chiara Franzoni, and Diletta Di Marco (both of Politecnico di Milano). It involved more than 2,300 citizen evaluators who assessed four real research proposals using both a recommendation mechanism (advising a funding agency) and a crowdfunding mechanism (donating their own money). The proposals covered a diverse range of topics including COVID-19 drug discovery, Alzheimer's, otter-human conflict in Florida, and economic preferences across demographic groups.

Each participant read a real research proposal from the science crowdfunding platform experiment.com and then assessed it based on three core criteria:

- Scientific merit, the extent to which the project would advance academic knowledge
- Social impact, the project's potential to benefit society, health, or the environment
- Team qualifications, the perceived ability of the research team to deliver on the project

The researchers found that when making their final funding decisions, participants weighed social impact and scientific merit nearly equally, while team qualifications played a smaller but still important role. "Our findings challenge the simplistic idea that nonscientists care only about feel-good impacts," said Henry Sauermann, professor of strategy at ESMT. "People care whether the science is solid, and the researchers are credible, even if they also prioritize relevance to real world problems."

The choice of evaluation mechanism strongly influenced who participated. Crowdfunding, which required participants to contribute their own money, gave greater voice to more affluent and educated individuals. The recommendation mechanism, in contrast, enabled broader and more inclusive engagement. This suggests that the choice of funding mechanism strongly shapes whose voices are heard. Personal connection also shaped perceptions. Participants who had a direct link to the topic were more likely to support the proposal and rate its potential impact higher. This suggests that self-interest or wishful thinking may influence public judgments. "Involving the public in science can democratize decision making, but it can also introduce new biases," said Chiara Franzoni, professor at Politecnico di Milano. "Evaluation processes must be carefully designed if we want to include citizen input in meaningful and responsible ways."

The researchers emphasize that evaluation patterns varied across topics, and different citizens prioritized different criteria. This variability presents a challenge for science governance: The processes of citizen involvement are difficult to manage and their outcomes difficult to predict.

Rather than choosing between expert review and public input, the authors propose hybrid systems that integrate both. While experts bring technical knowledge and methodological rigor, citizens may better reflect societal needs and priorities. Combining the two could strengthen both the quality and legitimacy of research funding decisions.

As policymakers and funding bodies consider expanding the role of citizen input in science, the authors call for thoughtful process design. “We should embrace public engagement not as a slogan,” said Sauermann, “but as a complex process that requires careful scaffolding, evaluation, and reflection.”

About ESMT Berlin

ESMT Berlin is a leading global business school with its campus in the heart of Berlin. Founded by 25 global companies, ESMT offers master, MBA, and PhD programs, as well as executive education on its campus in Berlin, in locations around the world, online, and in online blended format. Focusing on leadership, innovation, and analytics, its diverse faculty publishes outstanding research in top academic journals. Additionally, the international business school provides an interdisciplinary platform for discourse between politics, business, and academia. ESMT is a non-profit private institution of higher education with the right to grant PhDs and is accredited by AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS, and ZEvA. It is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion across all its activities and communities. [esmt.berlin](https://www.esmt.berlin)

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