

Opinion

Our country is divided. Science can unite us.

The Biden administration should hold a National Science Summit in the first 100 days.

By Okhee Lee

The presidential election and recent events on Capitol Hill were visible reminders of the deep ideological divide facing our country. Yet, [voters in nearly every state are unanimous in considering COVID-19 the highest priority](#). And while solving the pandemic is a complex problem, most can agree that science – which brought us a vaccine in less than a year – is critical to getting this country back on track.

Scientific research goes beyond the images of test tubes and a scientist in a white lab coat. Science gives us data and potential solutions to some of the most critical issues facing our country, from the pandemic and job loss to climate change, racial inequity, and economic disparity. Science also is something that most Americans can agree upon: [Only 3% of Americans have a negative view of the impact of science on society](#).

The Biden administration and the new White House science team can harness the positive view on science to unite the country by mobilizing a National Science Summit within the first 100 days. Science imparts the cachet to attract experts from across the American spectrum and bring them into the same room.

Participants of the Biden Science Summit will include scientists who work in government, but also leaders in business and industry, academia, and nonprofit organizations. Let's bring experts in mathematics, physics, psychology, economics, education, medicine, public health, engineering and technology. Their combined knowledge will equip the Biden administration with evidence-based solutions to critical issues, while also uniting Americans behind a common vision for progress.

The idea to convene a brain trust isn't new: American leaders set the precedent to call on experts in the face of crises.

President Bill Clinton inherited a country with high unemployment and a weak economy. He assembled experts in business, labor, and economics for an economic summit in 1992 in Little Rock, Ark. After two days of meetings, the new administration emerged with an economic strategy and fiscal policy that allowed the country to prosper.

President John F. Kennedy turned to science in the face of adversity. In 1961, shortly after his election amid Cold War tensions, Kennedy called for the nation's help to send man to the moon. The mobilization of scientific experts made the United States the leader in the space race against the Soviet Union and had the side effect of creating technologies that improve American lives to this day, from GPS to LED lighting. Over several decades, the space program produced spinoff technologies, including duct tape, wireless headsets, CAT scanners, freeze-dried foods, and memory foam. Our laptop computers are descendants of The Shuttle Portable Onboard Computer developed in the

early 1980s. The space program also led to better policies for American health and safety. The Food and Drug Administration safety guidelines for food handling are a result of space researchers discovering how to eliminate bacteria and toxins.

When our government unites behind science, Americans everywhere benefit. In 1970, Sen. Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin created the first Earth Day, leading to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA instituted scientific research, monitoring, standard-setting, and enforcement measures to keep our air and water clean. Over 50 years, these efforts protected the health and safety of millions of Americans and prevented 230,000 early deaths.

In all of these examples, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) were drivers in the innovation, investment, and infrastructures that benefit our country. Yet, by [every indicator](#), the United States is falling behind in STEM education. Highlighting the benefits of STEM and investing in STEM education are critical, so that we can prepare all students today to become the next generation of informed citizens and some to become scientific experts.

It's time to summon the best in the American spirit to unite our country for true progress that helps everyone. Guided by scientific research, let's invest in people, technology, and the social and physical infrastructures needed to tackle our nation's challenges. I look forward to seeing the outcomes of the 2021 Biden Science Summit.

Okhee Lee is professor of childhood education at New York University. She is recipient of the 2020 National Science Teaching Association Distinguished Service to Science Education Award.

Links:

- 1) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/voters-say-pandemic-top-issue-in-election-ap-survey-finds>
- 2) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/12/key-findings-about-americans-confidence-in-science-and-their-views-on-scientists-role-in-society/>
- 3) <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsb20201>