68-country survey shows that people still trust scientists: Global insights from largest post-pandemic study on public trust in scientists

An international team of 241 researchers, led by Dr. Viktoria Cologna (Harvard University, ETH Zurich) and Dr. Niels G. Mede (University of Zurich) has examined trust in scientists in 68 countries. Among the collaborators was Katerina Petkanopoulou, Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Crete.

Despite of the repeated claims of a crisis of trust in science, results of this study, published this week in Nature Human Behaviour (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-024-02090-5) find that most people in most countries have relatively high levels of trust in scientists. Further, a majority of survey participants believe that scientists should be more involved in society and policymaking.

"Our results show that most people in most countries have relatively high trust in scientists", says main study lead Viktoria Cologna, "and want them to play an active role in society and policymaking".

This study is the result of the TISP Many Labs study, a collaborative effort that allowed the authors to survey 71,922 people in 68 countries, including many under-researched countries in the 'Global South'. Second study lead Niels Mede: "The study is the most comprehensive post-pandemic snapshot of trust in scientists, societal expectations of their involvement in society and policymaking, and public views on research priorities."

Key Findings

Widespread trust: Across 68 countries, the study finds that a majority of the public have relatively high trust in scientists (mean trust level = 3.62, on a scale from 1 = very low trust to 5 = very high trust). Majorities also perceive scientists to be qualified (78%), honest (57%), and concerned about people's well-being (56%).

Desire for scientists' engagement: A majority of survey participants are in favor of science playing an active role in society and policymaking. Globally, 83% of respondents believe that scientists should communicate about science with the general public. Only a minority (23%) believes that scientists should not actively advocate for specific policies. 52% believe that scientists should be more involved in the policymaking process.

That said, our findings do confirm the results of previous studies that show substantial differences between countries and population groups. In particular, we find that in Western countries, people with right-wing political views have less trust in scientists than those with left-wing views. However, in most countries, political orientation and trust in scientists were unrelated.

Challenges and recommendations

Our findings also highlight some areas of concern. Globally, less than half of respondents (42%) believe that scientists pay attention to others' views. Our results also show that many people, in many countries, feel that the priorities of science do not always align well with their own priorities. Participants assigned high priority to research dedicated to improving public health, solving energy problems, and reducing poverty. Research on developing defense and military technology was assigned a lower priority. In fact, participants explicitly believe that science prioritizes developing defense and military technology more than they desire.

We recommend that scientists take these results seriously, and find ways to be more receptive to feedback and open to dialogue with the public, consider ways in Western countries to reach conservative groups, and, in the fullness of time, consider their role in setting priorities aligned with public values.

Besides publishing their results in a peer-reviewed journal article, the authors also developed a data visualization dashboard, in which users can explore the data and compare them across countries: https://www.tisp-manylabs.com/explore-tisp-data

The complete data underlying this study and a detailed description of the data have been published in the journal Scientific Data (https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-024-04100-7). The dataset also contains data on science-related populism, science communication behavior, and public perceptions about climate change.

- **Explore the Dashboard:** https://www.tisp-manylabs.com/explore-tisp-data
- **Learn More About the Project:** https://www.tisp-manylabs.com/