Global Trust in Scientists Revealed: Key Survey Insights

Description

The foundation of public confidence in the scientific community is indispensable. It serves to inform individual choices regarding health-related matters and facilitates evidence-based policymaking, essential during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the exigent challenges posed by climate change.

Our extensive survey, encompassing 71,922 participants across 68 nations, executed by a global consortium of 241 researchers, reveals a predominantly robust trust in scientists among the populace.

Significantly, the data indicates a strong public desire for scientists to engage proactively in societal discourse and in the formulation of policies. These findings are detailed in our latest publication in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

The implications of these findings for societal dynamics, as well as for scientists and policymakers striving to nurture and expand this trust, merit consideration. Below are the pertinent insights derived from our research.

Debunking the ‘Crisis’ Narrative

Despite indications from various reports and polls that public trust in science remains high, a recurrent narrative of a “crisis of trust” pervades discussions surrounding science and the credibility of scientists.

Some scholars contend that media portrayals of polling results can engender a self-fulfilling prophecy, eroding scientific credibility by perpetuating a narrative of distrust.

Further research posits that media narratives significantly shape public perception through framing, particularly observed in the context of political discourse surrounding scientific controversies. Exposure to certain media outlets can exacerbate skepticism, feeding into broader societal phenomena such as increased climate change denial.

Our research transcends Western perspectives, focusing on numerous underrepresented populations in the Global South. We scrutinize the authenticity of claims regarding diminished trust in scientists and explore variability across different national contexts.

A Comprehensive Global Survey

We undertook an expansive, crowd-sourced Many Labs project, deploying a meticulously translated survey across all inhabited continents and 68 countries. Data were collected from November 2022 to August 2023, utilizing weighted samples reflective of national demographics concerning age, gender, and education. Engaging with the comprehensive data is feasible through our interactive dashboard.

Trust in scientists was assessed through established constructs, including perceived competence, benevolence, integrity, and openness.

Global Trust Levels in Scientists

Our analysis reveals a generally elevated level of trust in scientists worldwide (mean trust level = 3.62, on a scale where 1 signifies very low trust and 5 indicates very high trust).

It appears that scientists are predominantly perceived as highly competent, with moderate integrity and benevolent intentions, yet are noted to be somewhat less receptive to feedback. A notable majority perceives scientists as qualified (78%), honest (57%), and committed to public welfare (56%).

No nation exhibited a marked deficit of trust towards scientists, reinforcing their position as credible authorities in diverse contexts.

Australia ranks fifth in terms of trust, significantly surpassing the global average, trailing only Egypt, India, Nigeria, and Kenya.

Variances in Trust Across Demographics

Our findings suggest that trust is marginally higher among women, older demographics, urban dwellers, and individuals with elevated income levels, formal education, and liberal political affiliations.

In most nations, political orientation demonstrated no significant correlation with trust in scientists.However, in Western contexts, individuals espousing conservative views exhibit diminished trust comparedto their liberal counterparts, corroborating findings from North America.

In Australia, political orientation does not appear to significantly influence trust in science, suggesting that polarization regarding scientific discourse may not be as pronounced as observed in specific contentious issues, such as climate change.

Globally, a salient factor influencing trust is an individual's endorsement of social dominance orientation, with individuals favoring social inequality displaying significantly lower trust in scientists. This aligns with prior research.

Expectations of Scientific Responsibility

A significant majority of participants advocate for an active scientific presence in societal affairs and policymaking.

Globally, 83% of respondents assert that scientists should engage in public discourse regarding scientific issues, particularly prevalent among African populations.

Additionally, approximately half (49%) posit that scientists should advocate for specific policies, while 52% believe they should partake actively in the policymaking process.

In Australia, roughly two-thirds (66%) support the notion of scientists advocating for policy positions, and 62% endorse greater involvement in policymaking.

Alignment of Scientific Priorities with Public Perception

Globally, a significant portion of individuals express concern that scientific research priorities do not adequately align with their own interests.

This misalignment is critical, as the gap between perceived and desired research priorities correlates positively with trust levels; diminished trust often results from the belief that scientific efforts do not sufficiently address personal expectations.

Overall, respondents prioritized research aimed at enhancing public health above all, followed by efforts to

mitigate energy-related challenges and alleviate poverty.

Conversely, research concentrated on military technology is perceived as the least critical, with a prevailing belief that science emphasizes it disproportionately.

Regional disparities exist, with individuals in African and Asian contexts advocating for increased emphasis on defense technology development.

Conclusion: Insights Amidst Assured Trust

The results of our inquiry resonate with prevailing Western narratives, revealing that scientists are amongst the most esteemed figures in societal trustworthiness. Our global findings indicate robust trust in the scientific community, alongside a strong conviction that scientists should engage with societal and policy issues.

This evidence challenges the prevalent notion of a crisis of trust in science.

Nonetheless, our findings underscore areas of concern: less than half of respondents (42%) believe that scientists actively consider diverse viewpoints. While scientists are perceived as competent, and generally possess benevolent intentions, there remains a notable perception of inadequacy in their openness to discourse.

Moreover, the disparity between public perception and the priority of scientific endeavors signifies a critical area warranting attention. We advocate for scientists to heed these findings, engaging thoughtfully with public feedback and fostering dialogue. In Western contexts, it is imperative for the scientific community to explore innovative pathways to engage conservative demographics.

In the long term, scientists ought to reassess their roles in establishing research priorities that align more closely with societal values.

Mathew Marques, Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology, La Trobe University; Niels Mede, Senior Research and Teaching Associate, Department of Communication and Media Research, University of Zurich; Viktoria Cologna, Postdoctoral Researcher, Swiss Institute for Advanced Study, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, and Zoe Leviston, Research Fellow in Social Psychology, Australian National University

CATEGORY

1. Health - LEVEL6

Date Created
2025/01/22
Author
aimeeyoung99