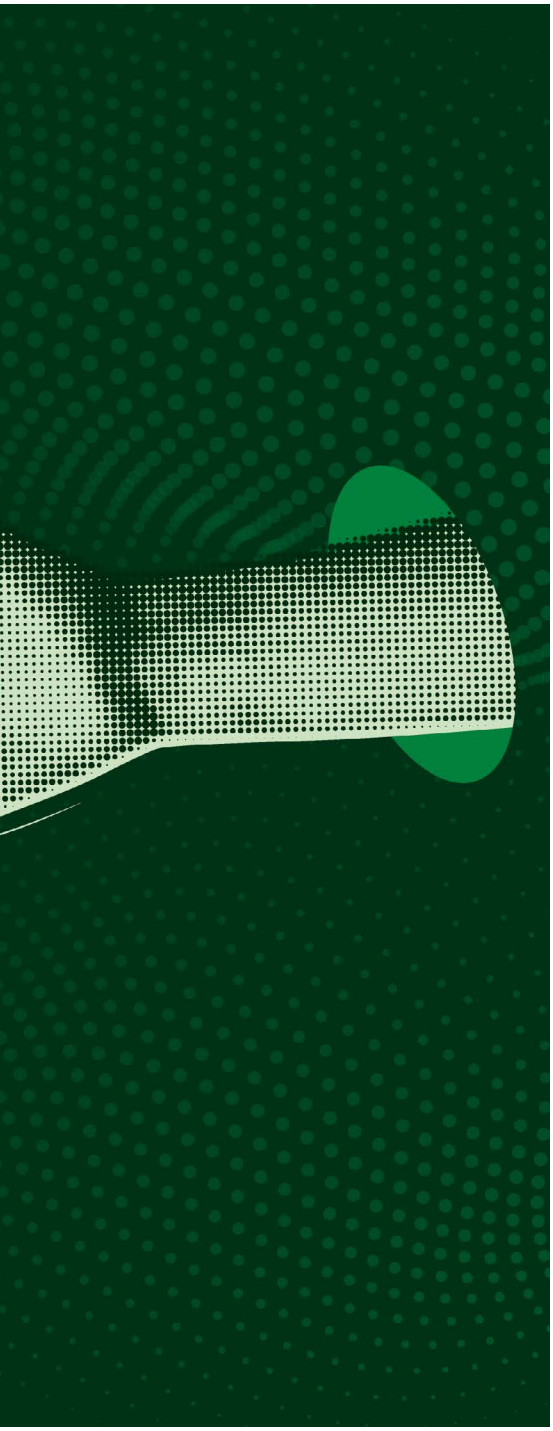
THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT TRUST IN SCIENCE



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Some say there's a crisis of trust — but the data tell a different story.

By Helen Pearson

From the United States to Europe to Brazil, there is a pervasive sense that trust in science has collapsed.

A UK survey[1] published in January found that only 40% of people think that science information they hear is "generally true". Another global poll showed that 70% of people believe at least one false or unproven claim, such as that the risks of childhood vaccines outweigh the benefits[2].

In the United States, President Donald Trump and his administration are using the idea that science is not trustworthy as one reason to cut research budgets, reject evidence-based medical advice and exert unprecedented political control over research. "Over the last 5 years, confidence that scientists act in the best interests of the public has fallen significantly," said Trump in an executive order last year.

Even the Vatican is voicing concern. This September, a meeting at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences will examine how "the crisis of trust in science has become a pressing issue".

But is trust in science really that weak? Researchers studying this have reached some surprising conclusions. From a global perspective, public trust in science and scientists is high, they say. One of the largest studies[3], which surveyed nearly 72,000 people across 68 countries in 2022–23, reported a "moderately high" average trust score of 3.6 out of 5. "The idea that there's a generalized, pervasive lack of trust in science and experts is just completely unfounded in my mind," says David Bersoff, head of research at the Edelman Trust Institute, a think tank in New York City.

But trust has dropped in certain groups, notably among Republican-leaning people in the United States. And research in the United Kingdom shows that the proportion of people who have "a lot" of trust in science tends to be lower among politically right-leaning groups than those on the left. "Trust in science is politicized and becoming more so," says sociologist Gordon Gauchat at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. In many countries, people are also increasingly questioning definitive evidence on divisive issues such as vaccines, partly because scientific information is being drowned out online.

Researchers say this is a problem because it undermines support for urgent policies — such as ones that tackle climate change — and because it can lead to personal decisions that harm health, such as shunning vaccines or medical treatments. "When science rejection leads to loss of life, that's concerning," says Natalia Zarzeczna, who studies people's beliefs at the University of Essex in Colchester, UK.

Pandemic problems

Concerns about trust in science have simmered for years, but they exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, when misinformation flourished and vocal groups questioned recommendations — such as vaccination and face masks — that research suggested could save lives.

In June 2022, as the pandemic waned, researchers Niels Mede and Viktoria Cologna put a call out on Twitter (now known as X) for people interested in surveying trust in science. Their tweets blew up — and before long they had a team of about 240 people, an international project called TISP (Trust in Science and Science-Related Populism) and the 68-country survey. "It got quite some attention," says Mede, who is now at Wageningen University & Research in the Netherlands and co-led the study with Cologna, now at the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology in Dübendorf.

The online survey asked 12 questions about scientists' competence, integrity, openness and benevolence, which are different dimensions of trust. This aimed to address criticism that surveys about trust in science in general are simplistic, because 'trust' and 'science' are broad terms. The team combined the results into a scale of trustworthiness, from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). The 3.6 global average largely fits with earlier global surveys suggesting that trust in science is high (see 'Solid support for science').

> "TRUST IN SCIENCE IS POLITICIZED AND BECOMING MORE SO."

The TISP analysis showed some regional variation. Trust was relatively high in some African countries, including Nigeria and Kenya, and low in Russia and some nations that were part of the former Soviet Union, such as Kazakhstan. (Mede says that high trust in some places, such as certain African nations, might be because people view scientists more favourably than governments that are seen as corrupt.) The United States ranked in the top third, and China near the middle.

Other data show that trust in scientists is high relative to that in other professions. A 28-country survey[4] run by the Edelman Trust Institute in 2025 found that 76% of respondents trusted scientists, a proportion on a par with teachers (73%) and well above that for journalists (54%) and government leaders (49%). "Probably a lot of other sectors and professions would like to be in science's shoes," says Gideon Skinner, head of political research at

market-research firm Ipsos in London, which has conducted international surveys that also show scientists in the top tier of trusted professions (see 'Trust in professions').

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a specialist in science communication at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, argues that there's "a rhetoric of science in crisis", rather than an actual one – and that it's nothing new. She traces the idea back to the widening recognition by scientists and the media in the 2010s, that many results in biomedicine and psychology could not be reproduced, a situation often portrayed as a 'reproducibility crisis'.

But data and experts largely point in the same direction. "Scientists are still regarded as quite trustworthy," sums up Eileen Yam, who directs science and society research at the Pew Research Center in Washington DC. Or at least, that's "the glass half-full rendering", she says.

Fractures in trust

The glass half-empty view, however, has data to support it, too. In a survey of people living in Britain, published in April[5], 84% of respondents said they had at least some trust in science. But the proportion who trusted science "a lot" dropped from 63% in 2020 to 34% – one of the "emerging fractures" in trust that the study identified.

One of the most prominent changes is taking place in the United States. Here, data collected by the General Social Survey (GSS) from 1973 to 2024 show that, overall, the proportion of people with some or a great deal of confidence in the scientific community remained stably high (above 80%) over 50 years[6]. But the proportion with a great deal of confidence declined sharply in 2022 (see 'US confidence in science').

This drop is part of a wider loss of trust in civic institutions, rather than being unique to science, research indicates[7]. A survey[8] by the Pew Research Center shows that the proportion of people with confidence in scientists to act in the public's interest fell from 87% in 2020 to 73% in 2023. But confidence in police officers, business leaders and elected officials similarly fell over this time.

"There are trend lines down in science, but those look very much like the trend lines in other institutions," says Jamieson. "There's an institutional crisis that is being reflected in science."

Dicing the data further reveals a growing political divide in the United States. Pew Research figures[8] show that the proportion of people who self-identify as Republicans or Republican-leaning and who have confidence in scientists fell from 85% in 2020 to 65% in 2025. Democrats' confidence barely budged, from 91% to 90%. The GSS data suggest the political divide emerged around 2005–10 (see 'Political polarization in science').

James Druckman, a political scientist at the University of Rochester in New York, has studied this split. He argues that it's partly explained by people in demographic groups that have, for decades, had relatively lower trust in science (particularly religious people) moving towards the Republican party and higher trusters (especially those with university degrees) moving towards the Democrats[6]. "They re-sorted," he says.

But that's not the only explanation for the polarization in the United States: politicians have fuelled it, too. Gauchat says that, starting in the mid-1990s, some politicians "realized they could mobilize groups of people" in the United States who were becoming critical of higher education in part because of its high cost. They helped to power the populist view that scientists, other academics and their institutions are part of an intellectual elite, "making them the villains", who do not represent the views of ordinary citizens, says Gauchat.

> "WE'VE ALWAYS HAD DISSENTERS, BUT IT'S BEEN VERY MUCH MORE ON THE FRINGE."

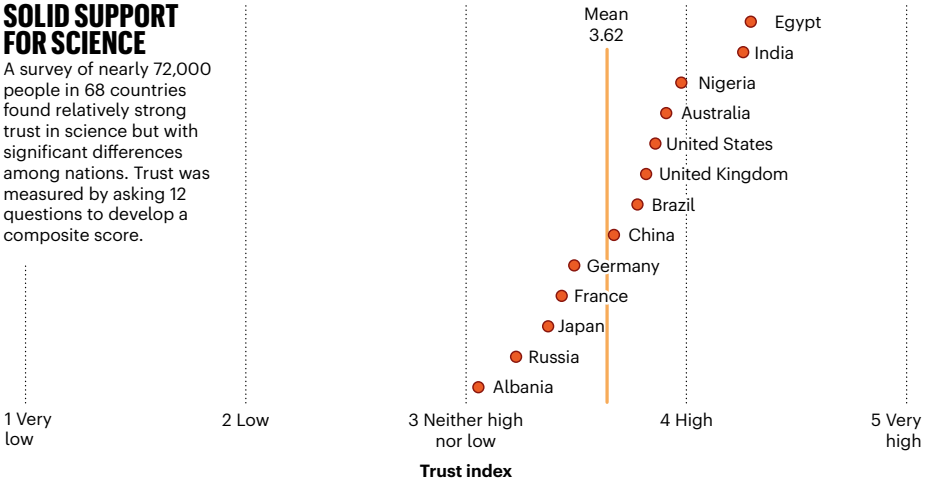
The pandemic accelerated and amplified the partisan divergence, say researchers, as some people grew sceptical of regulations on COVID-19 vaccines, face masks, lockdowns and other measures that science suggested could limit infections, while politicians fanned the flames of science distrust. Jamieson argues that often people object to policies that stem from science rather than the science itself. "If your ideology says we shouldn't be regulated, and the implication of the science is [that] politicians put regulation on the table, it's going to be easy for people to say, 'I don't like that'," she says.

The threat now, say researchers, is that the Trump administration is using science scepticism to justify drastic cuts to research and the undermining of evidence-based interventions such as vaccines. "They're saying, we're going to destroy these things, because this whole institution is not trustworthy," Druckman says.

There are signs of political polarization elsewhere, although it varies by country, according to the TISP global survey. This pointed to an association between lower trust and right-leaning political orientation in countries including Canada, Brazil, Italy and the

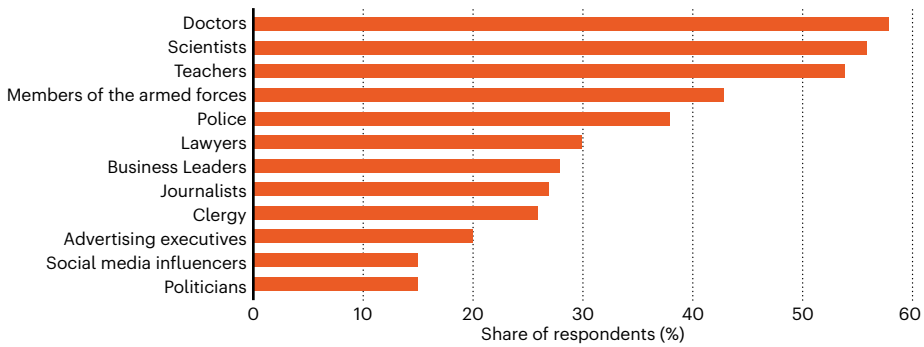
SOLID SUPPORT FOR SCIENCE

A survey of nearly 72,000 people in 68 countries found relatively strong trust in science but with significant differences among nations. Trust was measured by asking 12 questions to develop a composite score.



TRUST IN PROFESSIONS

Scientists ranked higher than almost all other professions in a 32-country survey of more than 23,000 people who were asked whether those in different job categories were trustworthy.



SOURCE: TOP, REF. 3; BOTTOM, IPSOS GLOBAL TRUSTWORTHINESS INDEX 2024

United Kingdom. But in other nations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, lower trust was linked to left-leaning orientation or there was no link with political stance. This might be because political leaders with different agendas have cultivated science-sceptical views among their voters, Mede says.

Druckman fears that support for science in the United States could end up 'ping-ponging' as administrations change. "You're going to have, 'build up the scientific institutions', 'tear down the scientific institutions'. That's completely destabilizing," he says.

Questioning the evidence

Polarization is one problem area for trust in science; another is people rejecting the scientific consensus on specific issues such as vaccines.

A 16-country survey[2] published in April by the Edelman Trust Institute found that 70% of respondents believed at least one false or unproven health claim, such as 'risk of childhood vaccinations outweighs benefits', 'raw milk is healthier than pasteurized' and 'paracetamol use during pregnancy causes autism'. Many of the claims in the study had been promoted by US health secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr and the wider Make America Healthy Again movement; the survey showed that such beliefs had spread well beyond US shores.

"There has definitely been a growing number of people who question widely accepted scientific evidence," says Heidi Larson, who studies confidence in vaccines at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Her team's work has shown that the perceptions of vaccines' importance for children dropped in 52 out of 55 countries during the pandemic[9]. "We've always had dissenters, but it's been very much more on the fringe," she says.

Researchers worry that reliable, science-based information is being drowned out by questionable claims and misinformation from people's personal contacts, social media, websites and, increasingly, artificial intelligence. The TISP project showed that social-media platforms, such as YouTube, were the most common source of science information for people in 53 out of 68 countries[10]. In the UK study on trust published in April[5], 38% of respondents said there was "now too much information available to know what is true about science".

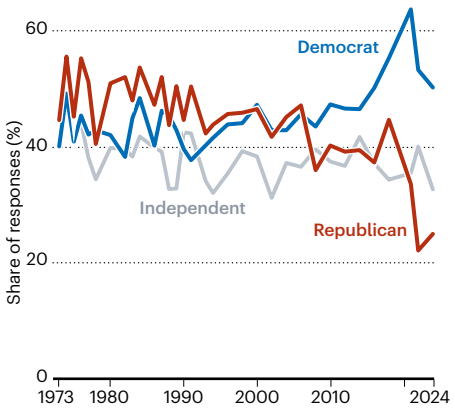
Larson says that trust in science needs to be put in context with "who else people trust". Some research suggests that people highly trust family, friends and religious leaders for information about science and health, as well as scientists. We're seeing a "redistributing" of trust, says Colin Strong, who leads behavioural science at Ipsos. "People are looking at other sources of authority and credibility" rather than someone's status at a scientific institution, he says. Bersoff argues that scientists are "not losing the trust battle. They're losing the influence battle because they're outgunned, they're outmanned, and they're not as effective because they're such sticklers for facts and data and research."

US CONFIDENCE IN SCIENCE

A national survey shows that people in the United States have had generally stable confidence in the scientific community over the past half-century, although the proportion with a great deal of confidence has declined sharply in the past few years.

POLITICAL POLARIZATION ON SCIENCE

Over the past two decades in the United States, the proportion of people with a great deal of confidence in the scientific community has increased among Democrats and dropped among Republicans.



Data from the General Social Survey. 2021 survey methods differed from other years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SOURCE: GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY.

Communication gap

Whether all this is called a crisis or a problem, researchers agree there is work to be done. A priority, say many, is to improve science communication and the influence of credible scientific information on social-media platforms. In a 2024 survey[11] on science attitudes in 35 European nations, 43% of respondents said scientists were bad at communicating.

The TISP survey showed that the public gave scientists lower ratings for being transparent and open (to feedback, for instance) than for other measures of trustworthiness. "That's something where scientists and science communicators can improve," Mede says. And some studies support the idea that acknowledging uncertainties and the evolving nature of science leaves people with a greater sense that information is trustworthy than do overconfident statements of the facts[12]. Jamieson argues that some loss of trust in science during the pandemic occurred because scientists failed to communicate uncertainties, such as that new research would emerge and conclusions might change.

Druckman's research suggests that increasing the diversity of the scientific community could help to build trust. In a study[13] published last December, he and his colleagues showed that people from science-sceptical groups are more trusting of people who share their characteristics – so women trust female scientists more than they do male ones, for instance.

But good communication is not enough, argue others. Social-media algorithms prioritize content that evokes outrage and emotion, not neutral presentations of science and data, says Alex Ruani at University College London, who studies misinformation. "We have great communicators, but they're not being amplified – the algorithm doesn't find them exciting enough," she says. She argues that technology companies should do better at spotting, flagging and limiting the spread of potentially harmful content – such as health posts that promote risky behaviour – and that government regulators should be more forceful in holding them to account.

Gauchat acknowledges that scientists can get a bit hung up on trust, fretting about "Why don't people trust us? Why don't we get huge amounts of funding? Why is there this pushback from government?", he says.

But it is of grave concern, he adds, if societies reject the fundamental idea that rational discourse and evidence can help improve the world. If people have lost "faith that humans can use knowledge to solve problems", he says, "that's scary".

Helen Pearson is a senior editor for *Nature* in London.

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