

Case study – Trust in Scientists in Ireland

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Trust in Science and Science-Related Populism (TISP) study

Largest post-pandemic study on public trust in scientists – Dr. Viktoria Cologna and Dr. Niels G. Mede led an international team of 241 researchers to survey 71,922 people in 68 countries.

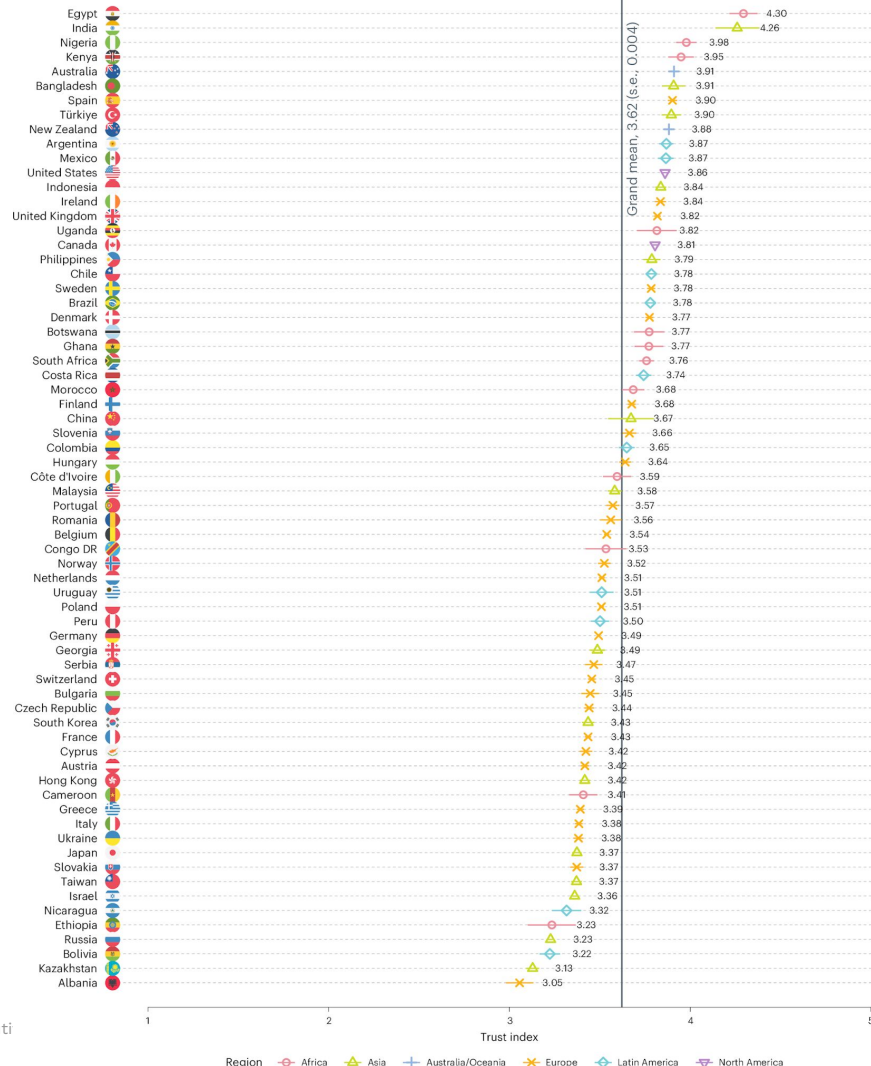
- **Methodology:** Online questionnaire using Qualtrics, quotas used for sample.
- **Dimensions:** Twelve items used to capture trust in scientists using four acknowledged conceptual dimensions of trustworthiness: competence; integrity; benevolence; and openness (Besley and Tiffany, 2023; Besley, Lee, and Pressgrove, 2021).
- Unweighted mean of all twelve items was used to measure overall trust in scientists – produce **trust index** (1 = very low, 3 = neither high nor low, 5 = very high).

All data is open access.

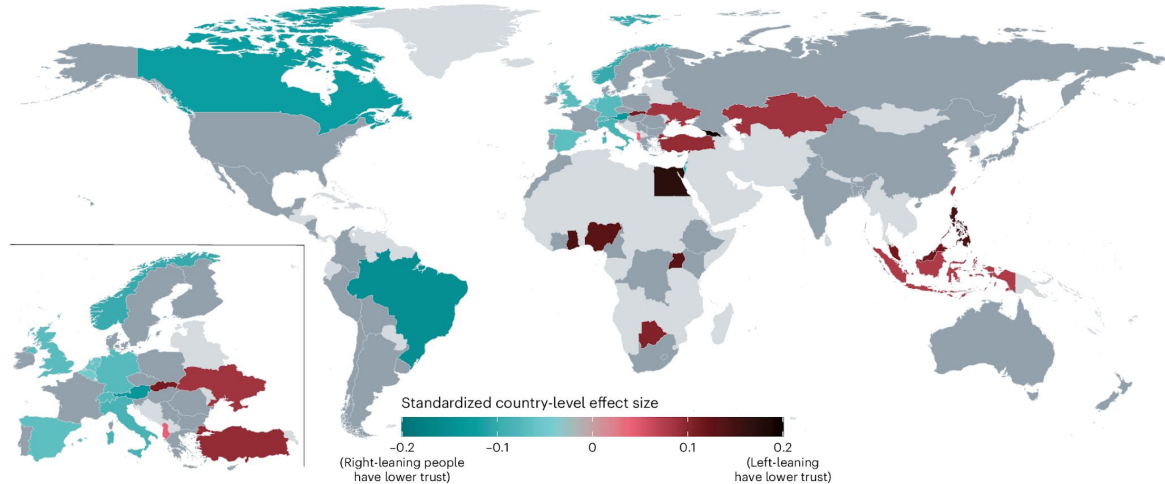
From this, we were able to learn some things about trust in scientists in Ireland....

Trust in scientists in Ireland

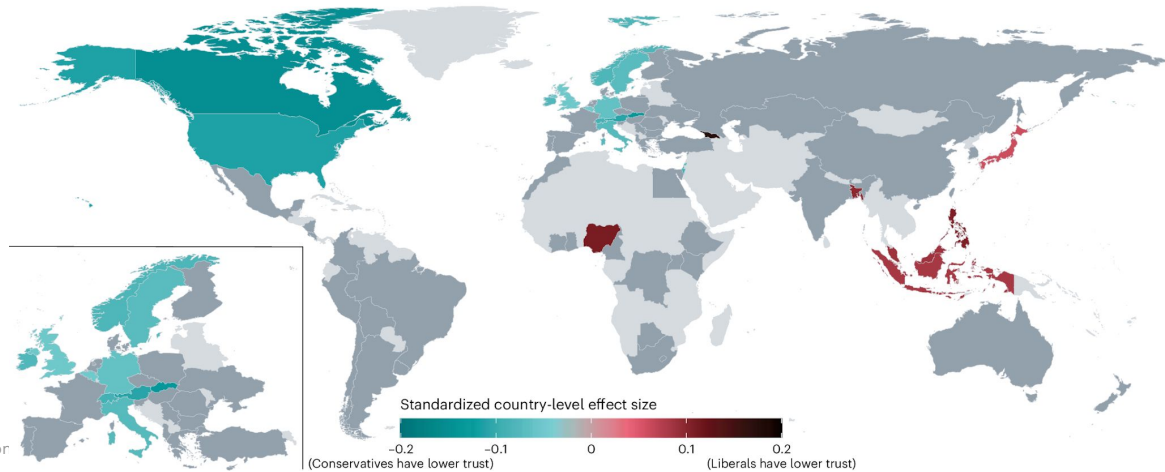
- Trust in scientists moderate, but higher than global average: (global M = 3.62 SD=0.7), IRE M = 3.87 SD=0.63)
- In Ireland younger people have significantly less confidence in scientists than older participants (lowest, Mean age 32.43; highest, mean age 32.43)



a Country-level effects of right-leaning political orientation and trust in scientists



b Country-level effects of conservative political orientation and trust in scientists



What does this mean for science communication in Ireland?

If we should worry about one group... it is young people?

People feel that scientists should be consummate professionals who demonstrate dedication to excellence, ethical conduct, openness, transparency, and continuous self improvement

Validation for Nature of Science (NoS) placing importance on not only learning the scientific method but also considering scientists as working professionals and their roles in society

Science and society in Ireland: examining public trust in scientists against a global background

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ABSTRACT

Public trust in scientists is vital for navigating complex global challenges, influencing evidence-informed policy, and promoting societal well-being. However, concerns exist about a potential crisis of trust in science, fuelled by misinformation, conspiracy theories, and science-related populism. The Trust in Science and Science-Related Populism (TISP) study investigated public perceptions of scientists across 68 countries. This paper examines the TISP findings for Ireland, focusing on public trust in scientists and the implications for the Irish educational landscape. The study reveals that trust in scientists in Ireland is generally moderate to high, exceeding global averages, but notably lower among younger respondents. Regression analyses show a strong association between trust in scientific methods and overall trust in scientists, highlighting the importance of robust science education with a strong emphasis on science communication. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses reveals a strong expectation that scientists should embody professionalism, integrity, and continuous self-improvement. These findings suggest a need for targeted science education and communication efforts in Ireland, emphasising critical thinking skills, understanding of the scientific process, and the ethical responsibilities of scientists. Promoting transparency, dialogue, and public participation in scientific endeavours will help foster a more robust and trusting relationship between science and society in Ireland.

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KEYWORDS

Trust in scientists; science communication; science education; public engagement with science; survey

Introduction

In an era defined by rapid technological advancements and complex global challenges, the role of science and scientists in shaping society and our future is increasingly important. From navigating the COVID-19 pandemic to tackling climate change, evidence-informed decision-making, informed by scientific expertise, is essential for navigating

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Trust in scientists and their role in society across 68 countries

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Science is crucial for evidence-based decision-making. Public trust in scientists can help decision makers act on the basis of the best available evidence, especially during crises. However, in recent years the epistemic authority of science has been challenged, causing concerns about low public trust in scientists. We interrogated these concerns with a preregistered 68-country survey of 71,922 respondents and found that in most countries, most people trust scientists and agree that scientists should engage more in society and policymaking. We found variations between and within countries, which we explain with individual- and country-level variables, including political orientation. While there is no widespread lack of trust in scientists, we cannot discount the concern that lack of trust in scientists by even a small minority may affect considerations of scientific evidence in policymaking. These findings have implications for scientists and policymakers seeking to maintain and increase trust in scientists.

Public trust in science provides many benefits to society. It helps people make informed decisions (for example, on health and nutrition) on the basis of the best available evidence, provides the foundation for evidence-based policymaking and facilitates government spending on research. Trust in science and scientists enables the management of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Societies with high public trust in science and scientists dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic more effectively, as citizens were more likely to comply with non-pharmaceutical COVID-19 interventions¹ and had higher vaccine confidence². People with high trust in scientists are also more likely to engage in individual and collective action on climate change^{3,4}.

Studies find that most people trust science, and scientists are among the most trusted actors in society^{5–7}. Despite these findings, there is a popular dominant narrative claiming that there is a crisis of trust in science and scientists^{8,9}. This narrative well predates the COVID-19 pandemic and may alter people's views about scientists^{10–12}. It is therefore important to revisit this narrative and provide robust empirical evidence on whether it is accurate.

Most previous studies have been limited to the Global North, typically the USA or Europe, including our own previous work (see, for example, refs. 13–19). A few studies have gone beyond these regions^{20–23}. However, they assess a limited range of theoretical

constructs. We address this limitation in two ways. First, we analyse the extent to which people believe that scientists should be involved in society and policymaking. We refer to this as 'normative perceptions of science in society and policymaking'. Second, we investigate which issues people want scientists to prioritize in their work and how such perceptions are related to their trust in scientists. Previous studies have shown that trust is affected by the perception of value alignment²⁴. People who feel that their concerns and values are not reflected in the priorities of scientists may therefore doubt the trustworthiness of scientists.

Our large-scale, preregistered survey expands and strengthens previous work by offering a comprehensive dataset on trust in scientists after the COVID-19 pandemic²⁵ and by investigating the public's normative perceptions of the role of scientists in society and policymaking and their desired research priorities. We use a theoretically informed multidimensional trust measure²⁶ and examine relevant demographic, ideological, attitudinal and country-level factors to explain trust across countries²⁷. We survey countries and individuals that are underrepresented in research²⁸, and, in almost all countries, we have worked with local research partners^{29,30}.

Our study answers the following questions. (1) How much do people around the world trust scientists, and how do levels of trust vary across countries? (2) How do demographic, ideological, attitudinal and

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