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Brazilians' trust in scientists grew in the pandemic, study indicates

By James

During the Covid pandemic, Brazilians' trust in scientists grew. This is what the results of an opinion poll carried out by the Centro de Estudos SoU_Ciência in partnership with the Instituto Ideia Big Data show.

Among the 1,252 people interviewed, 28.3% say that, for important matters, the source of information they trust most are scientists from universities or public research institutes. These professionals lead the research in this regard. In second place, doctors appear, with 13.9% of the answers.

In 2019, for the same question, 11.8% had scientists as their first choice. In 2015, the worst year in the series for researchers, only 7.8% cited people in science as the most reliable sources of information.

In previous years, clergy, doctors and journalists were ahead of scientists as the most reliable sources of information.

The poll's margin of error is plus or minus 2.85 percentage points. Telephone interviews were conducted from January 25th to 27th of this year with 1,500 people aged 16 and over from across the country.

"To tell you the truth, the result for us was surprising", says Soraya Soubhi Smaili, a researcher at the São Paulo School of Medicine at Unifesp and coordinator of SoU_Ciência. "The scientist's profession was highly valued. Before, you used to talk about a scientist and people didn't know what it was. 'Scientist, what is this?'"

The current study used a fraction of the dozens of questions from another opinion poll, carried out since 2006 by the CGEE (Center for Management of Strategic Studies), an organization supervised by the MCTI (Ministry of Science and Technology), in collaboration with the SBPC (Sociedade Brasileira for the Progress of Science) and the INCT-CPCT (National Institute for Public Communication of Science and Technology).

SoU_Ciência researchers, who have a blog on sheettook advantage of these questions to continue the historical series of the CGEE survey, which has not been carried out since 2019 (in addition to the 2019 edition, there were three others, in 2006, 2010 and 2015).

The importance of doing research right now, says Pedro Arantes, a professor at Unifesp and one of the coordinators of SoU_Ciência, is to capture the impact that the pandemic had on the perception of science and technology in Brazil.

"Science has become a political subject in Brazil. This is in contrast to a denialist government. Brazilian society is perceiving science, not only through science, but in a public and political dimension — not partisan", says Arantes. "Science has occupied an important public space, helped to organize the debate in Brazil, to react to misinformation, to attempts to limit and postpone vaccination", evaluates Arantes.

Although the survey shows people's greater trust in scientists, knowledge on the subject remains far from the majority of the population, the data also point out.

Almost 58% of respondents said they did not remember any research institution in the country and about 74% did not know the names of important Brazilian scientists.

Among those remembered are Oswaldo Cruz, Carlos Chagas, Átila Iamarino and Natalia Pasternak — just over 3% of those interviewed who mentioned a name mentioned the German Albert Einstein.

Despite this, SoU_Ciência representatives point out that the numbers have improved in relation to past CGEE surveys.

In the 2019 survey, for example, more than 90% of respondents did not remember the name of a Brazilian scientist and about 90% could not indicate a scientific institution in the country.

In the SoU_Ciência study, Instituto Butantan and Fiocruz were the most remembered, respectively by 40.1% and 22.5% of those who managed to cite institutions. There is another possible connection with Covid, after all, these were the institutions that, in Brazil, led the production and distribution of vaccines against the disease during much of the pandemic, thus gaining constant space and citations in the press.

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Coronavac, from Butantan, was the first vaccine widely applied in the country and guided the first months of the immunization campaign. Astrazeneca/Oxford, from Fiocruz, later took the lead in the applications.

The name of these institutions and the researchers who are part of them have reached far, to the point of becoming part of the pop imagination. Arantes remembers, for example, the remix of the song “Bum Bum Tam Tam”, by MC Fioti, talking about Coronavac and Butantan — with the right to a clip on the premises of the institution.

But there is still a long way to go to improve public understanding of science, the researchers point out.

“We had a popularization and now we have to go to an awareness”, says Smaili. “It is not enough to expose the scientist and talk about science. We have to combine all this with a public policy that increases the population’s perception of science, with science programs in schools, at work, to make it accessible. Science It’s a citizen’s right.”

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