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Opinion – Sou Ciência: Brazilian society awakens to science

Despite the advance of denialism and the president's attacks on scientists, Brazilians trust science, especially that produced by universities and public institutes. More than that, they trust, defend and are interested in knowing more.

This is what a survey carried out by SoU_Ciência in partnership with Instituto Ideia Big Data shows, based on updated and unpublished data, which we publish on our website. The opinion poll shows that we are facing a new 'political subject' of great confidence by the population: the 'public scientist' is almost a new national hero. Fortunately, a non-messianic, evidence-based hero. But there is still a lot to be done for a real translation and 'scientific literacy' in Brazil and for the deepening of the debate on different areas, methods and purposes of scientific work – not always consensual.

The current situation shows that the clash between denialism and science does not occur strictly in the field of knowledge, but also in the field of politics, where the right to life is at stake. It is in this context that science has also consolidated itself as a political subject and one of the main social forces of opposition. In other words, science is not restricted to laboratories and specialists, and has come to be recognized by Brazilian society as a public good, part of citizenship.

When carrying out the survey, we continued a historical series that had been produced by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MCTI) and the Center for Management of Strategic Studies (CGEE) on the perception of science and technology in Brazil. The series, however, had its last collection in 2019 and did not have data that referred to the current context of the country. We've updated the results for 5 relevant questions based on responses from 1,200 people. Data collection was carried out across the country at the end of January, already partially published in an article in Folha de S.Paulo.

Respondents were asked about their level of interest in eight subjects (politics, health, environment, art and culture, science and technology, sports, economics and religion), and the results indicate that the areas of interest that grew the most among 2019 and 2022 were science and politics, while interest in religion declined.

This measurement is not accidental. The role of the federal government in the pandemic led to a "politicization of science" and a public visibility of debates and contradictory positions, where, on the one hand, there was the government and some doctors "chloroquiners", and, on the other, the rest of the scientists and advocates of the Unified Health System (SUS) based on evidence.

Tied as topics of greatest interest are health (87%) and the environment (86%), followed by science and technology (82%) and economics (80%). These are important topics not only for the moment of the pandemic, but also because they are areas that are heavily attacked by the federal government, which refer to the economic and social crisis, cut of resources, erratic policies and even facilitation of environmental destruction.

In the question about which professions Brazilians trust the most as a source of information, the growth of scientists from public institutions was impressive – undoubtedly the result of the work to combat covid-19. In 2019, scientists were tied with religious and behind doctors and journalists. In 2015, they were in fourth place. But in 2022, they reach 41.6% of the preference of Brazilians, a spectacular growth of 253% compared to 16.4% in 2019.

It is interesting to note that the scientist's direct "competitor" in the other researches, the religious leader, fell into popular preference. After reaching its peak in 2015 as a possible "reliable source of information" (chosen first by 19.5% of Brazilians), it dropped in 2022 to 1/3 of the previous prestige, just 6.5%.

Confidence in politicians remains on the ground, with less than 1%. This means that the renewed interest of Brazilians in politics, mentioned above, does not represent an increase in the prestige of politicians, but a possible politicization of society.

Despite the appreciation, only 26% of respondents said they knew the name of a scientist. The number may seem low, but it is almost 4 times higher than in 2019, when only 7% knew the name of a Brazilian scientist.

This shows us that both scientists need to continue to make an effort to translate science to the general public, and that more public policies of inclusion and encouragement are needed. To know and appreciate science, you need curiosity on the one hand and access on the other. In addition, it is essential to carry out a series of dissemination actions and SoU_Ciência also has the mission of contributing to this process.

Asked the same question about research institutions, the result was equally impressive. In 2019, only 9.4% of Brazilians knew how to name a Brazilian research institution. In 2022, that number jumped to 42.2%, that is, it rose more than 4

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times. The highlight was for Instituto Butantan in first place, and Fiocruz in second.

The survey reveals that, despite the human and political tragedy we are experiencing, the pandemic has left a positive balance: science and its professionals are being recognized, valued and, more than ever, are part of Brazil's political agenda. Indispensable elements to build a future with development and advances in all areas.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenge will be to ensure that the "pro-science wave" does not recede, but takes us to a new level in the relationship with knowledge, with the increase in Brazilian society's capacity for discernment. May this awakening usher in new and favorable times of sustainable development with social justice, with more health and education for the entire population.

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