

COVID-19 has increased trust in science: Can it do the same for the social sciences?

*While many politicians have experienced declining levels of public trust during the pandemic, faith in science has generally held up well. However, as **Christina Boswell** argues, there are a number of reasons why social sciences may struggle to achieve similar levels of authority.*

The issue of public trust has become absolutely central in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. As the German sociologist [Georg Simmel](#) observed a century ago, trust involves a leap of faith: a willingness to rely on others to act on our behalf under conditions of uncertainty.

Trust is crucial wherever we rely on collective action, as it implies confidence that others will play by the rules. It is also vital where we need to bestow authority in experts to make the right call on our behalf: developing treatments or vaccines, for example, or taking decisions on public health measures.

Yet, the pandemic has exacerbated a divergence in levels of trust in different institutions. While politicians and government have seen declining levels of trust through the pandemic, [faith in science has held up extremely well](#). Indeed, Ipsos MRBI's [Veracity Index for 2021](#) shows nurses and doctors enjoying trust levels of (respectively) 95 and 94%. Scientists, meanwhile, are enjoying trust levels at 87% – despite the small but vocal anti-vaccine movement. By contrast, politicians are down at 24%.

This has surprised many of us working on science-policy relations. [Writing about the new prominence of 'experts' a year ago](#), I feared the UK Government's constant invocation of 'the science' might serve to politicise research, potentially jeopardising its authority. Where the Government made unpopular decisions, was muddled in its messaging or clearly made a wrong call, the blame would be shifted to science, contaminating it with the same mistrust. Yet, while the UK government did indeed make many mistakes and u-turns, trust in the medical professions and science more widely has held up well.

How trust is generated

So what explains this divergence in public willingness to trust science, but not the politicians who invoke it? Surely the two areas are so intertwined that scepticism about politics would contaminate public trust in science?

Here it is useful to consider *how trust is generated*. Trust is a form of inference, based on familiarity or previous experience. We learn to trust people because we have experience that they will behave in predictable ways, making us confident about their future conduct.

In large, complex societies, this confidence cannot just be grounded in our direct experience of the behaviour of other individuals. We need to extend our confidence to familiar social 'types', relying on proxy characteristics such as those with a similar background to us, or who support the same political party, or live in our neighbourhood. Alternatively, and this is especially relevant in the COVID context, we may learn to trust people with particular training or who work in a particular profession, such as nurses.

We may also infer future behaviour through processes that reassure us about the *motivations of people or organisations*. If we know that breaches of rules or contracts will be penalised, and that people will generally be motivated to respect their word, then we can suspend our doubts and make that leap of faith to trust in their actions.



Sadly, both of these mechanisms for grounding trust have been badly undermined in the case of politics. Publics have become extremely cynical about the motivations of politicians – with the reasons for this cynicism reflecting a range of broader social and political trends:

- the decline in traditional left-right axes of political contestation, which have made voters less certain about how political parties will promote their interests;
- the messiness of policy-making processes, which leads to compromise and disappointment that governments do not redeem their pledges; and
- the rising influence of more cynical theories of political behaviour, which see voters as consumers in a political 'marketplace', keen to maximise their power through 'marketing' attractive products.

And these trends have been exacerbated by recurrent scandals about the conduct of politicians.

Why the science and medical professions have sustained trust

By contrast, the science and medical professions have been able to sustain trust through both of the mechanisms identified above. Publics have retained their faith in these professions because they have proved their worth, through successfully delivered treatments and vaccines. Indeed, advances in medicine and health treatment provide uniquely compelling evidence of progress in science. This generates a confidence that medicine will continue to deliver, as it has been proven to do based on precedence.

Just as importantly, publics have confidence in the *motivations and conduct* of these professionals. Doctors and nurses are guided by clear ethical norms and a strong professional ethos, and members of the public have direct exposure to their conduct through their own experience of treatment.

This is less clearly the case with science, where there is less-advanced understanding of goals, etc. But the pandemic has provided a platform for scientists to demonstrate their excellent skills in science communication. Through clear, accessible explanations, and by demonstrating their deep commitment to improving health outcomes, scientists have helped the public understand their motivations (i.e. what makes them tick).

Social sciences may struggle to achieve similar trust levels

This implies that there is much for the science and research community to be optimistic about. But can this trust in science translate to other branches of research? As the UK Government's Chief Scientific Adviser Patrick Vallance has pointed out, now that science and medicine have managed to pull us out of the crisis, the urgent issues to address are social and economic: the health and socio-economic inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic and lockdown.

Yet there are a number of reasons why social sciences – and especially humanities – may struggle to achieve a similar level of authority and trust.

- The first reason is that **social science tends to be more fragmented, contested, and is often perceived to be imbued with normative preferences**. This is partly because of the nature of many of the issues with which social scientists grapple, which invoke different interests or values rather than being purely 'technocratic'. Issues such as inequality, education or immigration are the object of strong ideological contestation, in a way that many areas of technology are not. Perceptions of normative bias in social science have not been helped by the 'culture wars' and the targeting of higher education and academics as pursuing left-ist or '[woke](#)' agendas.
- Second, **social scientists tend to work in smaller groups or as individuals, often using qualitative methods**. While such studies may be just as robust as quantitative ones (and in many instances, far more nuanced and insightful), smaller qualitative research is often perceived as less rigorous. Moreover, those applying ethnographic approaches are generally cautious about claiming generalisability, which can imply that research is not considered sufficiently robust to underpin policy.
- Thirdly, **most policy interventions based on social sciences do not yield the clear outcomes that we have seen in the case of healthcare or vaccines**. Interventions to address social problems in the areas of inequality, education or employment are often uncertain, and – even where successful – difficult to attribute to particular policies. So social scientists may not even get credit where their research has underpinned successful policy interventions.

These three factors point to challenges for social scientists in building trust in their work. They need to learn from their medical colleagues about the importance of communicating research, developing compelling narratives about the importance and rigour of their research. Linked to this, they need to continue to build relationships of trust with both policy actors, and with the media who cover stories about science.

Importantly, social scientists also need to learn to make connections across research – not just through collaborative projects, which are increasingly the object of research funding; but also through alliances that build and elucidate bodies of knowledge in a particular area. Rather than working alone or in small groups and seeking recognition for individual projects, we need to incentivise ways of joining up multiple research projects, preparing syntheses that present compelling evidence.

We need to foster trust in social science

These insights are not new. But unfortunately they run against the grain of current systems and incentives for academic impact, which focus on identifying [outcomes produced by individual research groups or pieces of research](#).

This means that social scientists are not sufficiently recognised or rewarded by their institutions or research communities for media engagement, relationship-building, or for joining up and communicating bodies of research (beyond their own). This implies the need for a rethink of how we value and reward engagement: we need to adjust models and incentives to encourage practices that foster trust in social science.

This blog was first published by the [International Public Policy Observatory](#), an ESRC-funded collaboration investigating the long-term social impacts of COVID-19.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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