

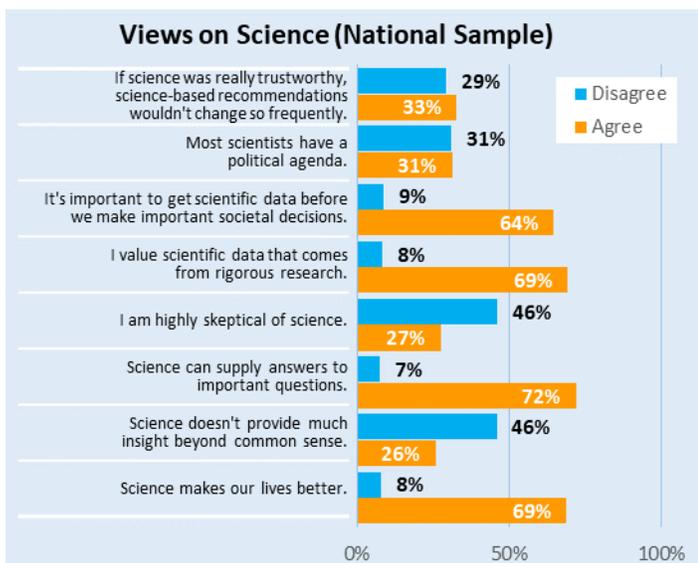
Science on Trial: Nationwide Views on Science and Scientific Evidence in 2022

By Dennis Devine

Attitudes about science have become part of a national conversation. We are regularly barraged with all sorts of “scientific” findings that have implications for our physical and mental well-being as well as our behavior as consumers. And nearly every U.S. adult has had to make a decision about getting vaccinated for COVID. The flurry of health and safety-related recommendations flowing from scientific research has triggered a loud and at times rancorous public dialog about the value of science. This raises an overarching question: Do people trust science?

ThemeVision recently conducted a nationwide survey about various topics related to jury duty. One issue we addressed was how respondents felt about science—scientists, scientific data, and science in general. More than 1,000 U.S. adults responded from across the country. The sample adhered closely to the national demographic profile on a number of key characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity. It wasn’t a random sample, but it was large, diverse, and fairly representative of U.S. adults in many ways.

So what did our respondents think about science? We used a five-point response scale for our eight questions about science (strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither disagree nor agree, somewhat agree and strongly agree). Here is the breakdown of agreement/disagreement for each question:



Overall, most respondents were fairly positive towards science. About 70% agreed science makes our lives better and can supply answers to important questions. Similarly, about two-thirds said they value scientific data that comes from rigorous research, and it’s important to get it before making important societal decisions.

Conversely, no question elicited a negative view of science from a majority of our respondents. About one in four reported being highly skeptical of science, and about the same number said it doesn’t provide much insight beyond common sense. A slightly higher proportion—about one in three—agreed scientists have a political agenda and/or science-based recommendations wouldn’t change so often if they were really trustworthy.

Science and beliefs about science are front and center in many

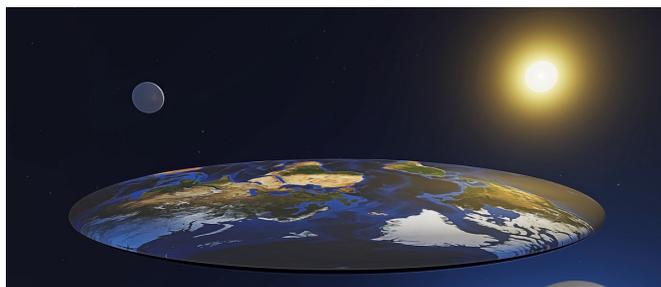
jury trials. Doctors inform about the causes and consequences of injuries and medical conditions. Psychologists educate about mental states and psychiatric disorders. Engineers explain theories, principles and phenomena related to the physical world. And forensic experts testify about various kinds of scientific tests and the conclusions that can be drawn from them. Sometimes science is on the periphery of a case, but sometimes it’s at the heart.

It’s interesting to speculate on the impact of anti-science jurors at trial. Being pro-science doesn’t necessarily mean a juror would put stock in any “scientific” evidence that’s offered up. Pro-science jurors might actually be more inclined to scrutinize scientific data offered by experts. But if the data meet their personal threshold for trustworthiness, pro-science jurors might become strong advocates for the side that offered it.

The presence of anti-science jurors could make for a very interesting jury deliberation. These individuals would be more likely to reject “scientific” data and stand apart from other jurors in terms of how they view the evidence. But their impact on group discussion could be substantial and persuasive if they provide cogent reasons for their beliefs. Anti-science views could also trigger a backlash among moderate and pro-science jurors, potentially eliciting exasperation and concerted faction-based efforts to bend anti-science jurors to a different worldview. Social science research indicates minorities of one in the jury room usually don’t end up succeeding, eventually getting worn down informationally or psychologically by the majority. Yet if a small bloc of anti-science jurors manages to stick to its guns, the jury could hang and produce a mistrial. The presence of diverse viewpoints on science within the jury could also have some benefits. In particular, a cohesive anti-science bloc could elicit a deeper, more rigorous discussion of the evidence during deliberation via a spirited dialectical discourse.

Our ThemeVision nationwide survey data suggest a majority of jurors in the typical 12-person jury will likely be pro-science whereas one or two jurors might be anti-science. And based on our experience, the split of anti-science versus pro-science jurors might depend on other factors such as the type of science at issue in a particular case or the geographical region of the country.

So are these data good or bad? Like many things in life, it may depend on how you look at it. If you consider yourself a member of the pro-science camp, the “glass” of public belief about science could be viewed as mostly full. And if you consider yourself one of the anti-science community, well, maybe the glass is just flat.



Dennis J. Devine, PhD, MJ



Dennis Devine is a Litigation Consultant with ThemeVision LLC.

He has published extensively in psychology and law journals and is the author of *Jury Decision Making: The State of the Science (2012)*, a book that summarizes the scientific research on juries and offers an integrative theory of jury decision making.

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