

Canadians' trust in science falling, poll suggests

44% consider scientists 'elitists' and many discount science that doesn't align with personal beliefs

Bob Weber | The Canadian Press | Posted: Sep 23

A survey suggests that the trust Canadians place in science may be eroding.

The survey, by the polling firm Ipsos for the multinational 3M company, also found that nearly half of those surveyed thought scientists are elitist and that a significant number of respondents discounted findings that don't accord with their personal beliefs.

"While science skeptics represent the minority of Canadians, their number is increasing," said Richard Chartrand of 3M Canada. "This trend is concerning because it shows that distrust is growing."

The Canadian figures are from a global survey of more than 14,000 people between July and September 2018. It's the second year 3M has done the research.

At a time when accelerating climate change and wildlife loss are placing science at the top of the public agenda, the survey found 32 per cent of respondents were skeptical about it. That was up from 25 per cent the previous year.

"It moved from one person out of four to one person out of three," Chartrand said. "It's difficult for us to understand why."

The study's results were conflicting. While doubt was growing, nine out of 10 respondents said they still trusted research results.

Answers to other questions showed that trust to be wary.

Nearly half — 44 per cent — said they considered scientists "elitists."

Of those who said they were skeptical of science, about one-third felt scientists were influenced by government agendas. Another third thought science has been swayed by corporate agendas.

And 30 per cent said they only believed science that aligned with their personal beliefs.

Other findings have echoed this survey.

'Depressing but not too surprising'

A 2017 Leger poll for the Ontario Science Centre found 29 per cent of respondents thought that because scientific theories are subject to challenge, they can't be trusted. Another question suggested 43 per cent considered science to be a matter of opinion.

"It's depressing but not too surprising," said John Smol, an ecologist at Queen's University who has written about the issue. "There's a real disconnect between what scientists do and what is the perception in the public."

Smol fears Canadians don't understand how science works — that data, not belief, is what counts and that science advances when old beliefs are upended, not shored up by unspoken consensus.

"There are certainly misconceptions," he said. "You can't blame them. It's a jungle of misinformation out there."

It's not all the public's fault, said Stephen Johnston, chairman of earth and atmospheric sciences at the University of Alberta.

"We have to make an effort to communicate in terms that are understandable," he said.

"There used to be an ethic in science that the lower the number of people who actually understood what you did, the better you are doing. That is turning around."

Smol agreed.

"We have a real responsibility to make [science] accessible. We're still doing a relatively poor job of translating the data — by and large paid for by taxpayers — and passing it to the public."

The poll did show curiosity about science. Almost all respondents thought findings should be shared in easily understandable language and 88 per cent wished they knew more about science.

"I look at these results and think they're quite positive," said Johnston. "People appreciate that science is a necessary thing. There's an insatiable appetite for science."

The bridge between the public and the lab must be bridged, said Chartrand.

"There's a clear message in this survey."

Source: CBC News

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