

government-funded research and development agreements for pandemic-related products". This move will at least make it possible to know which, if any, governments are including pandemic-related conditions in their research grants. The problem is that demanding that the terms of the contracts are made public, without specifying what these terms should be, is not enough.

Suerie Moon, a global-health policy researcher at the Geneva Graduate Institute in Switzerland, rightly asks: "Do we want to take an approach that helps countries to structure their collaboration with each other? Or do we want to maintain the status quo, where countries are essentially competing with each other?" High-income countries might feel that they're better off on their own, she says. "But for most countries in the world, there's a huge advantage to collaborating and agreeing on the rules of that international collaboration."

An international treaty is a rare opportunity for countries, companies and researchers to commit to making pandemic-related technologies accessible and affordable to all. Funders should take this opportunity and play their part in making that happen.

## Making the most of trust in scientists

**How can researchers capitalize on the public's trust in them and help to address concerns about government interference in science?**

**P**eople around the world have high levels of trust in scientists, but are concerned about governments interfering in research. These are among the findings reported by the global communications giant Edelman in its Trust Barometer, an annual survey that, in its latest iteration, consulted more than 32,000 people across 28 countries, from Mexico to Japan (see [go.nature.com/4bgsipa](https://go.nature.com/4bgsipa)).

The report, published in mid-January, shines a spotlight on public trust in science and innovation. It follows several tumultuous years dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, impacts resulting from climate change, falling standards of living and increasing global instability – and comes as the world grapples with a new challenge from innovation, the explosive rise of artificial intelligence (AI).

Scientists are among those most trusted by the survey's respondents to tell the truth about innovations and new technologies, with 74% of respondents saying they trust scientists to tell the truth. A similar proportion said that they wanted the introduction of innovations to be led by scientists. By comparison, just 47% of respondents said that they trusted journalists and 45% trusted government leaders to tell the truth on innovations.

However, the survey also hints at a growing challenge for

scientists and governments alike, with 53% of respondents saying that science in their country has become politicized, referring to interference in science by politicians. Globally, some 59% said that governments and research funders have too much influence on how science is done – with the proportion rising to 70% and 75% in India and China, respectively. And nearly 60% of all respondents think that their government lacks the competence to regulate emerging innovations.

The findings suggest both an opportunity and a challenge for scientists. How can researchers leverage people's trust in them to improve the likelihood of government policy and decisions being evidence-based, while helping to address the public's concerns about government interference and the lack of confidence in regulatory processes?

The report is certainly timely. Governments worldwide have long looked to science and innovation to boost economies, but the pandemic has added a sense of urgency. Approaches being tried include clustering universities in cities in the hope of yielding the next Amazon or Google; policies that encourage entrepreneurial ideas from faculty members and students; readily available finance for every stage of a business idea; and relatively light-touch regulation so products can quickly reach consumers.

The latest such proposal came last week from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, an influential policy-research think tank in London set up by the former UK prime minister. Its report on innovation in biosciences proposes a much bigger role for AI in medical science and clinical practice (see [go.nature.com/3ugt3gh](https://go.nature.com/3ugt3gh)). To this end, the institute is urging the UK government to reform regulatory structures that govern how researchers and companies can access anonymized patient data. But if the Edelman report is correct, and people are concerned about governments interfering in science and having poor regulatory competence, then ways must be found to turn that around.

In this context, the social sciences present an invaluable and underused tool. In January, a report by the UK Academy of Social Sciences rightly reminded governments of the need to embed social science in their science, technology, engineering and mathematics policymaking as one way to enhance public trust (see [go.nature.com/4bioq0i](https://go.nature.com/4bioq0i)). Data scientists, economists, ethicists, legal scholars and sociologists are among the social scientists who are skilled at studying the strengths and limitations of new technologies, as well as different economic and regulatory models – and communicating their findings, along with all the attendant uncertainties.

If people think that science has become politicized and that governments are interfering too much in research, that is a problem not only for science, but also for society, because it could affect public confidence in governments' ability to deliver the benefits of science and innovation, while simultaneously protecting people from harm.

Scientists should make the most of the public's trust in them as a source of information on innovation. And they should work with governments to dissuade them from overly politicizing science. Governments have an equal part to play in this – and *Nature* hopes they are listening.

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