

COMMENT
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To boost vaccination rates, invest in trust

In a global health crisis, clear and trustworthy communication among institutions, experts and citizens is crucial.

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Recent data from Italy, in line with those from several other countries, show that a significant proportion of citizens either do not plan to get vaccinated against Covid-19 (21%), or would rather not be among the first to receive the vaccine (38%)^{1 2}. There are several indications that such attitudes do not result from generalised scepticism about vaccination (held by 4% of Italians, according to empirical studies³) and neither from a generalised distrust in science and scientists, in which trust has been consistently high during the past few years in Italy.

Instead, attitudes towards vaccines against Covid-19 must be read in the context of broader perceptions of the management of the current crisis, and of how those perceptions have changed from the first to the second wave of the pandemic.

According to surveys conducted by our group (see end note), Italian citizens' evaluation of how well local, national and international institutions (including WHO) are managing the current crisis were largely positive in March and April 2020. More recent data, though, point to a significant worsening of that evaluation. The share of citizens who judge positively the role of national scientific experts has also decreased by 23% between April and October 2020, with a quarter of citizens now having a negative judgment (figure 1).

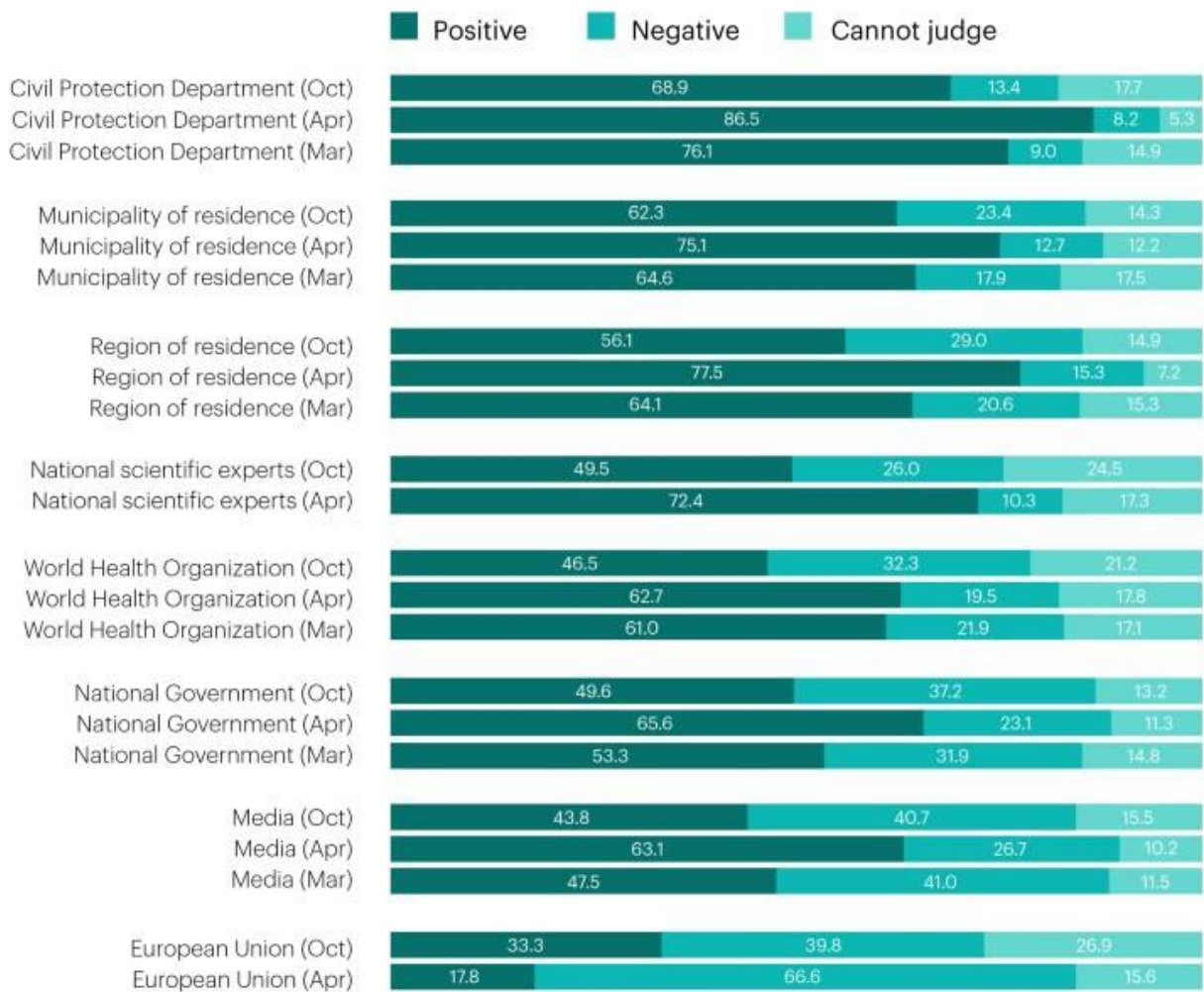


Figure 1. Answers to the question: how do you judge the work of the following actors/institutions in handling the pandemic (%). Source: Science in Society monitor, Observa Science in Society.

Our data also indicate that media overexposure of national scientific experts is increasingly perceived as a source of confusion: 62% lamented this confusion in October, versus 48% in April. Fewer than one fifth of Italian citizens now consider the experts' communication to be clear and effective, and one-tenth would prefer them to provide their advice confidentially to policy-makers, rather than publicly (figure 2).

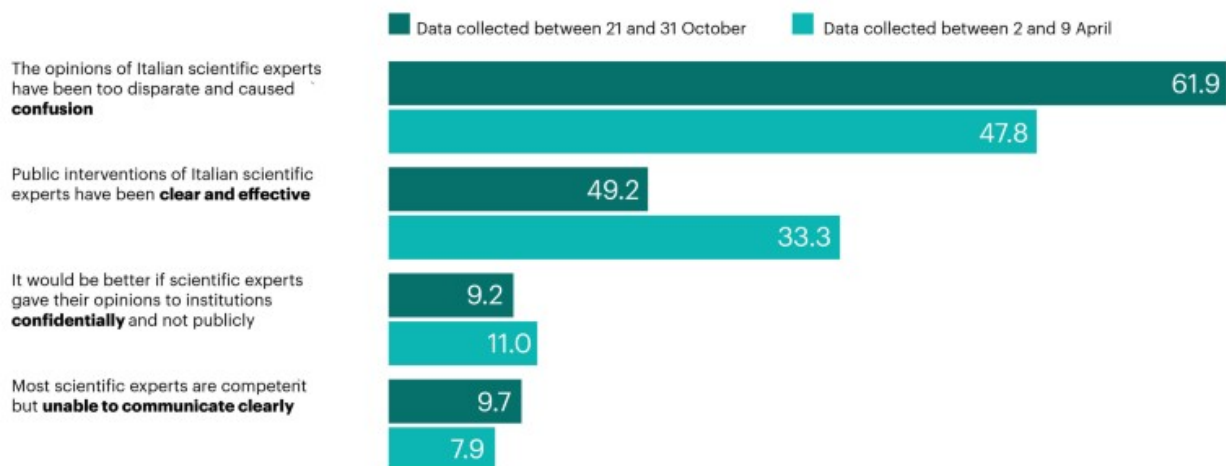


Figure 2. Answers to the question: think about the Italian scientific experts who have intervened publicly on the pandemic. Which of these statements best reflects your thinking? (%). Source: Science in Society Monitor, Observa Science in Society.

What are the main factors driving this change, and what can be learned in view of the next stages of the crisis?

The importance of mutual trust between citizens and institutions has become evident on several occasions during the past months – in many countries, and in Italy in particular. It has become increasingly common for policy-makers and experts to represent the public as hostile, sceptical and ignorant during the last few months. ‘Irresponsible’ citizen behaviour has often been blamed as the key driver of the second wave. Such representation supports a paternalistic and ultimately authoritarian vision of science communication and of science in society. As the literature from the past two decades clearly shows, this vision largely reflects unfounded prejudices⁴.

It is crucial instead to build mutual trusting relationships among institutions, experts, and citizens. This requires open and clear communication from institutions, one that supports and reinforces responsible citizen behaviour rather than emphasize distrust and paternalism⁵. These principles were affirmed, among others, by the [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control](#). On the other hand, long-term educational investments are needed to help citizens navigate through information and identify reliable sources.

As for hesitancy towards vaccination against Covid-19, it should not be discarded as an expression of generalised irrationality. Instead, it should be taken seriously, addressing concerns and responding, for example, to the preoccupation that the quick availability of vaccines may have implied political shortcuts or even led to underscore potential risks.

Unfortunately, the [communication plans](#) made available so far by the Italian government in connection with the planned vaccination campaign so far are not very structured or detailed. The unprecedented exposure of expert sources across the media has found many institutions unprepared to deal with such responsibility. In many cases, communication by scientific experts (and sometimes even by research institutions) has been guided mostly by personal goodwill and inclination, without much consideration given to the extensive literature available on this topic, to data on public perception and audience intelligence⁶.

More investment and effort should be devoted to developing science communication skills within institutions, sharing data and practices at the international level, developing comparative studies and platforms on how science communication (and even more, the quality of science communication) relates to mutual trust between citizens and institutions.

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Data source and methodology

The *Observe Science in Society Monitor* has monitored opinions and attitudes toward science and technology in Italy since 2003. The survey described in the article was conducted on a national sample, proportional and representative by gender, age and area of residence of Italian populations aged over 15 years. The first survey was conducted between 3 and 10 March 2020 interviewing 1002 subjects; total cases became 979 after weighting in order to make the sample structure identical to the Italian population with regard to the variables gender, age and study level. The second survey was conducted between 2 and 9 April interviewing 1048 subjects (1029 after weighting). The third survey was conducted between 21 and 30 October interviewing 1001 subjects (991 after weighting). Data analysis: Barbara Saracino; graphics: Eliana Fattorini.

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