

# Democracy trumps cash as key to Nobel success

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For a scientist to win a Nobel Prize, many things have to come together—ample funding, a supportive environment, even luck. But one rarely recognised factor may be more important than any other: democracy.

"Of course, you need to have at least the fundamental resources," said Swedish virologist Erling Norrby, a former member of the Nobel Committee for Medicine. "But science also requires an open society. A democratic system is very important."

There is solid science behind the claim that democratic systems and Nobel prizes go together, according to Warren Smith, an American mathematician with the website Rangevoting.org.

He has carried out statistical analysis on the correlation between a society's level of [democracy](#) and its ability to rack up Nobel Prizes. The conclusion: Democracies create Nobel-worthy [research](#), non-democratic regimes don't.

"It could be a fluke, but it's unlikely. There's a statistical probability of 0.01 that something this impressive could happen by chance," said Smith, whose study excluded the peace prize.

Even the Soviet Union, often highlighted as an authoritarian state that could produce good research, may be less of an exception than it seems.

On a per-capita basis, the United States has done 17 times better than the former Soviet Union, Denmark 39 times better.

The democracy link could also go a long way towards explaining the pro-Western bias of the Nobel prize.

Historically, 247 out of altogether 834 Nobel Laureates—including winners of the literature and peace prizes—were born in the United States. Many more did their Nobel-winning research at US universities.

Middle Eastern countries have performed badly in the prize stakes—a phenomenon some have sought to explain with religion.

Prominent atheist Richard Dawkins stated this year in a controversial tweet that "all the world's Muslims have fewer Nobel prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge."

But Nidhal Guessoum, an Algerian-born astrophysicist with the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, warned against seeing the Islamic Nobel dearth as exceptional.

"Brazil, with its 200 million population, has not had any Nobel prizes in any category, whereas Egypt, with 80 million, has had four, including one in science, though the work was done in the US," he said, also pointing out a lack of Nobel recognition for China.

"And yet I haven't heard anyone hint at 'underlying deficiencies' in the Brazilian and Chinese cultures."

Instead, some scholars say, the poor performance of countries as diverse as China and Saudi Arabia in the Nobel stakes might be explained by their autocratic nature.

"There is a lack of democratic culture, and a culture of debate and controversy. And science needs debate. You need to be able to disagree with someone without insulting him," said Jean Staune, a philosopher of science at the Interdisciplinary University of Paris.

This particular "spirit of democracy" was also a key feature in a celebrated speech by prominent Swedish academic Sune Bergstroem in 1976, when he described the rapid expansion of American universities in the immediate post-war years.

"The growth of university research was characterised by a dynamic openness in forms which might be characterised as a democracy of research workers," he said.

James Wilsdon, an expert on [science](#) and politics at the University of Sussex, pointed out that one laureate after the other talks about "a particular form of creativity and freedom" allowing research that "sometimes goes in unexpected directions."

But it is not enough that the research institute where the Nobel-aspiring scientist works is democratic. The society outside the gates has to be democratic too, according to Wilsdon.

Rich countries in the Gulf region have spent large sums of money on universities built from scratch and meant to operate as oases of free thinking inside otherwise closed societies, but so far with little to show for their efforts, he said.

"In the case of countries in the Middle East, it is doubtful if you can artificially create that culture in a microcosm without a broader openness in the social system," he said.

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