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You bet – an intellectual wager can focus our attention

Gambling and science don't seem to mesh, but a playful bet can focus attention on the detail and force us to hone our arguments



Luke Sharrett/Bloomberg via Getty Images

THE Plataeans were besieged: walled in by their enemies, the Spartans. They could make ladders to climb out, but how tall should they be? Citizens were asked to guess the wall's height by counting its bricks, with the most popular estimate taken as correct. It worked: 212 duly escaped.

This episode from 428 BC is the first known use of the wisdom of crowds – collating estimates to arrive at an answer more accurate than any individual can manage. That lies at the heart of a variety of tools used to run our society, from opinion polls to financial markets. Adding an incentive – in other words, allowing people to bet on the outcome – encourages as much participation as possible.

Science has a long tradition of turning to wagers when facts are hard to come by: for example, Stephen Hawking has famously made several bets with his fellow theoretical physicists over various abstruse properties of black holes. Other celebrated (or notorious) wagers have been placed over artificial intelligence and the abundance of important metals.

The stakes are often pretty low in such bets. But the ethos of crowd wisdom still applies: the point is to encourage both bettors and onlookers to gather facts and hone arguments. It's in that spirit that we asked a bookie to quote odds on possible breakthroughs, ranging from a Martian colony to human cloning (see "Odds on: 10 science breakthroughs you can bet on").

Now others are raising the stakes for scientific wagers. The Long Now Foundation's Long Bets project, for instance, highlights issues that will resonate beyond our lifetimes. And researchers at hedge fund Winton Capital and the London School of Economics recently proposed that the UK host a "prediction market" in which bets could be placed on aspects of climate change. That could help gather information that's currently widely dispersed – and perhaps even build consensus around ways in which climate change is the most likely to unfold.

Given the frequent failures of gamblers, pollsters and traders to predict real outcomes, it's unclear how desirable or plausible that is. But would you bet against it?

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