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The Dominance of US in the Nobel and Abel Prizes, 2017-2026

*By Gregory T. Papanikos**

The dominance of the US in the Nobel and Abel Prizes, 2017-2026, is examined by the country of the laureate's institutional affiliation at the time of the award. Over the decade, 101 laureates in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine and Economic Sciences were affiliated with institutions in 13 countries, with the US accounting for 66 (65.3%) and Europe for 26 (25.7%). The Abel Prize shows a similar pattern but less concentrated: 6 of 12 laureates (50%) were in the US and 4 (33.3%) in Europe. The US-Europe duopoly persists; China and India have no institutional laureates in this period, while Russia's absence marks a decline from a historically strong position.

Keywords: *Nobel Prize; Abel Prize; United States; geography of science; research excellence*

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Introduction

Technology and innovation play an important role in promoting economic growth and welfare. Governments have long recognized their importance and have developed policies that promote research and development (R&D). Most of this research is conducted within universities. Great countries have great universities, as I have explained in Papanikos (2025). Great universities, in turn, are great because, among many other achievements, they have won many Nobel Prizes, as demonstrated by Schlagberger et al. (2016, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Abel and Nobel Prizes by the country of the awardee's institution over the last ten years (2017-2026).

The Abel and Nobel Prizes "market" looks very much like the professional sports market. Athletes are trained in one club or country and then end up playing in the top leagues of the world in their respective sports. Very few countries dominate sports such as football, basketball, and ice hockey. Similarly, very few countries dominate the Abel and Nobel Prizes, even though many laureates were neither born nor produced their major works in the country where they were working when they received the prize. These issues have been extensively discussed in the literature.

The difference between sports and scientific excellence is the time lag between achievement and recognition. In sports, recognition is almost instantaneous, e.g., a country wins the World Cup or wins the most medals at the Olympic Games. In science, however, recognition comes much later, sometimes after several decades (Becattini et al., 2014 & Bjørk, 2019). This is why an Abel or Nobel Prize awarded in a given year is often for achievements made a few decades earlier. By then, the laureate may have moved not only across institutions but also across countries and more than one time.

Albert Einstein's Nobel Prize in Physics illustrates why the criterion of attribution matters. Einstein was born in Ulm, Germany, and received the prize, awarded for 1921 and formally conferred in 1922, for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect. That work dates to 1905, when he was employed at the patent office in Bern, Switzerland, so the prizewinning research was done in Switzerland. He subsequently held professorships at the University of Zurich, at the German University in Prague (then part of Austria-Hungary, now in the Czech Republic) in 1911-1912, and at the ETH in Zurich, before moving to Berlin in 1914. When he received the Nobel Prize, he was working in Berlin, so by the method used in this paper the prize is credited to Germany. Attribution by birth, by citizenship (he held Swiss citizenship), or by the place where the work was done would give different answers.

Time also complicates attribution, since the recognition came about sixteen years after the achievement, by which time he had moved across institutions and countries. In total, four countries may claim Einstein's Nobel Prize: Germany, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Austria (Prague was in the Austrian half of the Habsburg monarchy). Furthermore, Einstein moved to the United States in 1933 and died there in 1955, so one might argue that the US deserves some credit, even though he moved there after receiving the prize. To complicate

matters further, Israel may also count Einstein's Nobel Prize as its own, since he was Jewish. In fact, when Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann, died in 1952, Israel offered the presidency to Einstein, who declined.

One solution to this accounting problem is to credit every country associated with each laureate. My guess is that the analysis would not change substantially at the country level. These issues, however, are not examined here. Instead, we consider only the country in which the laureate's institution was located at the time the prize was awarded.

There is a good reason for adopting this approach. Von Zedtwitz et al. (2025) refer to the phenomenon as Nobel "Pride," whereby the fame associated with a laureate extends to the institution and country with which he or she is affiliated. This recognition accrues primarily to the institution and country at the time of the award. After all, if the laureate acts as a magnet for attracting new talent, that talent is likely to be drawn to the laureate's current institution, where researchers can find and work with the laureate's research group. By contrast, the prestige associated with the country in which the laureate was born or the institution where the Nobel Prize-winning discovery was made is likely to have a much smaller effect. For the wider public, these associations are primarily of historical interest.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the study period and the data. Section 3 provides an overview of the Abel and Nobel Prizes. Section 4 presents the achievements of the past decade. Section 5 discusses the intense competition between Europe and the United States and examines why the much-anticipated emergence of new contenders, particularly China and India, has yet to materialize. Section 6 concludes the paper.

Study Period and Data

This study covers the ten prize years from 2017 to 2026. The choice of this period is motivated by two considerations. First, a decade provides a manageable and readily replicable window for examining the contemporary geographical distribution of laureates, rather than the historical patterns that characterized much of the twentieth century. Second, the period allows us to examine the extent to which major geopolitical and scientific developments since 1989, particularly the opening of the former Soviet states and the rapid expansion of China's research capacity, are reflected in the geographical distribution of major scientific prizes. Given that the Nobel and Abel Prizes frequently recognize research conducted decades before the award, the laureates of this period may provide an indication of how these transformations have influenced the international geography of scientific achievement.

Data on laureates and their institutional affiliations were obtained from two official sources: the Nobel Foundation's website (NobelPrize.org) for the Nobel Prizes and the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters' website (AbelPrize.no) for the Abel Prize. The structure of both prize programs remained

stable throughout the study period, allowing annual counts to be compared on a consistent basis.

For the Nobel Prizes, the analysis includes Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, and Economic Sciences, yielding a sample of 101 laureates. Literature and Peace are excluded because these prizes do not specifically recognize scientific research conducted at academic or research institutions. For mathematics, the analysis covers the Abel Prize, yielding a sample of 12 laureates over the same period. Although the Abel Prize sample is smaller, it provides a basis for descriptive comparison with the Nobel Prizes in the selected scientific fields.

Laureates were assigned to countries according to the country in which their affiliated institution was located at the time of the award, as recorded on the respective official websites. When two institutional affiliations in different countries were listed, the first was used for classification. An important limitation of this approach is that, because the prizes often recognize work completed decades earlier, the resulting geographical distribution is likely to reflect the research strengths of earlier periods rather than the current distribution of scientific output (Jones and Weinberg, 2011). The findings should therefore be interpreted as an account of the geographical distribution of recognized scientific achievement during the study period, rather than as a direct measure of contemporary national research performance.

The Nobel and Abel Prizes

There are many awards for excellence in mathematical research (see Helsvig, 2014; Meier, 2012; Rajani & Ravi, 2014). This paper examines only the Abel Prize, for two reasons. First, the prize was created to be the mathematical counterpart of the Nobel Prizes: it was presented from the outset as “the missing Nobel Prize in mathematics” and aimed to become the world’s leading prize in the field (Helsvig, 2014). This makes it the natural point of comparison for the Nobel categories analyzed here. Second, the Abel Prize is awarded annually and has no age limit, so it recognizes the full range of a mathematician’s career. The Fields Medal, by contrast, is given only every four years and only to mathematicians under 40.

The Abel Prize was established by the Norwegian government in 2002 and is administered by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Research (<https://abelprize.no/winners>). Named after the Norwegian mathematician Niels Henrik Abel (1802–1829), it was created in the year marking the bicentenary of his birth. It was intended, in part, to address the absence of a dedicated mathematics category among the Nobel Prizes. The first Abel Prize was awarded in 2003 to the French mathematician Jean-Pierre Serre for his fundamental contributions to several areas of mathematics.

The Nobel Prizes originated in the will of Alfred Nobel, the Swedish inventor and entrepreneur, who devoted most of his fortune to establishing awards recognizing contributions of exceptional benefit to humanity. The five

original categories were Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature, and Peace. The prizes were first awarded in 1901, following Nobel's death in 1896. In 1968, Sweden's central bank, Sveriges Riksbank, established a prize in economic sciences in memory of Alfred Nobel; it was first awarded in 1969. Although commonly referred to as the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, it is formally distinct from the five prizes established under Nobel's will. The prizes in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature, and Economic Sciences are awarded by Swedish institutions, whereas the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded in Norway (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/2026/advanced-information/>).

Table 1 presents the 30 countries with at least five Nobel Prize country assignments over the period 1901–2025, ranked by count. The classification follows the nationality or nationalities attributed to laureates on the official Nobel Prize website. Consequently, a laureate may contribute to more than one country's total when multiple nationalities are recorded. The table does not distinguish between prizes awarded to a single laureate and those shared by two or three laureates. Its counts should therefore be interpreted as country-level assignments under this classification rule, rather than as a count of unique individuals or prizes attributable exclusively to individual countries. According to the underlying dataset, 85 countries are represented, with 1,260 country assignments in total.

The distribution reported in Table 1 reveals a substantial concentration of Nobel recognition among a relatively small number of countries. The United States ranks first, with 425 assignments, accounting for 33.7% of the total. The United Kingdom follows with 144 (11.4%), ahead of Germany with 116 (9.2%) and France with 78 (6.2%). Together, these four countries account for approximately 60.5% of all country assignments. The United States alone accounts for roughly one-third of the total and has almost three times as many assignments as the United Kingdom, the second-ranked country. These figures illustrate the historical concentration of Nobel recognition, although they do not, by themselves, establish the causes of that concentration.

The table also highlights the position of other established scientific nations. Sweden, Japan, Russia/the Soviet Union, Canada, Switzerland, and Austria occupy the next positions in the ranking. Japan, with 33 assignments (2.6%), is the highest-ranked Asian country, while China has eight (0.6%). India records 13 (1.0%). These figures suggest that the historical distribution of Nobel recognition has been concentrated in North America and Europe, with a more limited representation of Asian countries. However, because the table aggregates awards over more than a century, it cannot establish whether the relative position of these countries is improving or declining in more recent decades.

An important qualification concerns the interpretation of national totals. Nobel Prizes recognize individual achievements, often following research conducted over many years and across multiple institutions and countries. Nationality-based counts therefore differ from measures based on the country of the institution with which a laureate was affiliated at the time of the award. They also differ from measures of current research output. Table 1 should consequently be understood as a historical overview of Nobel recognition by

nationality, rather than as a direct ranking of contemporary national research systems.

Finally, Table 1 includes all six Nobel Prize categories, including Literature and Peace, which do not specifically recognize scientific research. Since the present study examines the geographical distribution of research excellence, the subsequent analysis focuses on the Nobel categories most directly associated with scientific and scholarly achievement—Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, and Economic Sciences—and compares their distribution with that of the Abel Prize in mathematics. This narrower focus provides a more appropriate basis for examining the geographical distribution of recognized research achievement.

Table 1. *List of Top 30 Nobel Laureates Countries, 1901-2025 (%)*

Country	Count	Percent
United States	425	33.7%
United Kingdom	144	11.4%
Germany	116	9.2%
France	78	6.2%
Sweden	34	2.7%
Japan	33	2.6%
Russia/Soviet Union	30	2.4%
Canada	29	2.3%
Switzerland	27	2.1%
Austria	25	2.0%
Netherlands	22	1.7%
Italy	21	1.7%
Poland	18	1.4%
Hungary	16	1.3%
Australia	14	1.1%
Denmark	14	1.1%
Norway	14	1.1%
Israel	14	1.1%
India	13	1.0%
Belgium	11	0.9%
Ireland	11	0.9%
South Africa	11	0.9%
China	8	0.6%
Spain	8	0.6%
Ukraine	6	0.5%
Belarus	6	0.5%
Czech Republic	6	0.5%
Egypt	5	0.4%
Argentina	5	0.4%
Finland	5	0.4%

Source: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes/all/>

The Achievements of the Last Decade

Table 2 presents the Abel Prize laureates for 2017-2026 by the country of their institutional affiliation at the time of the award. Ten prizes were awarded in the decade. Because the 2020 and 2021 prizes were each shared by two mathematicians, the total number of laureates is 12. Six countries are represented among the 12 laureates. The United States accounts for six (50.0%), with a laureate affiliated with a US institution in every year from 2018 to 2023. France follows with two (16.7%), in 2017 and 2024. Germany, Japan, Israel, and Hungary each account for one laureate (8.3% each). The United States and France together account for eight of the 12 laureates (66.7%). Since 2024, the laureates have been affiliated with institutions in France, Japan, and Germany, with none in the United States. Because the total is only 12, each laureate represents 8.3 percentage points, so these shares are sensitive to single awards and should be read as descriptive rather than as evidence of a trend.

Table 2. *Abel Prize (mathematics) laureates by country of institution, 2017-2026*

Country	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	Total
United States	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	6
France	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Germany	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Japan	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Israel	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Hungary	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	12

Count = number of laureates. Country = institution at the time of the award.

Source: <https://abelprize.no/winners>

Table 3 reports the corresponding distribution for the Nobel Prizes in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, and Economic Sciences. Over the same decade there were 101 laureates, affiliated with institutions in 13 countries. The United States accounts for 66 (65.3%) and had at least four laureates in every year. Germany follows with eight (7.9%), the United Kingdom with six (5.9%), Japan with five (5.0%), and France with four (4.0%). Canada and Switzerland have three each (3.0%), and the remaining six countries (Sweden, Hungary, Austria, Denmark, Italy, and Australia) have one each (1.0%). The five leading countries together account for 89 of the 101 laureates (88.1%).

The United States, Europe, China, India and Russia

The United States and Europe account for most recent recognition in both tables. In Table 3, institutions in the United States account for 66 of the 101 Nobel laureates in the four scientific categories in 2017-2026 (65.3%), and European institutions account for 26 (25.7%): Germany (8), the United Kingdom (6), France (4), Switzerland (3), and one each for Sweden, Hungary, Austria,

Denmark, and Italy. Together they account for 92 laureates (91.1%). The Abel Prize is less concentrated in the United States but still concentrated in the same two regions. In Table 2, US institutions account for six of the 12 laureates (50.0%) and European institutions for four (33.3%), so the two regions together account for ten (83.3%). The remaining two laureates were affiliated with institutions in Japan and Israel (8.3% each). The US share is thus lower for the Abel Prize than for the Nobel Prizes, and the European share is higher. With only 12 Abel laureates, however, each laureate represents 8.3 percentage points, so this difference should not be over-interpreted.

China and India are not recent laggards. Neither country appears in either table, and neither has ever won large numbers of Abel or Nobel Prizes. Measured by the country of the laureate's institution, India's science Nobel Prizes are essentially limited to C. V. Raman (1930), and China's to Tu Youyou (2015), and neither country has an Abel Prize. Many laureates of Indian and Chinese origin did their work and received their prizes in the United States or the United Kingdom, so they count for those countries under the method used here. The nationality-based counts in Table 1 show this difference: India has 13 assignments (1.0%) and China eight (0.6%), although Table 1 covers all six Nobel categories over 1901-2025. The 2017-2026 results are therefore a continuation of the long-run pattern, not a new development.

Table 3. *Nobel Prizes by country of laureate's institution, 2017-2026*

Country	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	Total
United States	4	8	7	6	6	7	6	8	6	8	66
Germany	2	0	0	1	1	2	2	0	0	0	8
United Kingdom	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	6
Japan	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	5
France	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	4
Canada	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3
Switzerland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	3
Sweden	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Hungary	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Austria	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Denmark	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Italy	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Australia	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	8	12	10	9	10	10	10	12	10	10	101

Note: It includes laureates in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, and Economic Sciences only (Literature and Peace excluded). Count = number of laureates.

Russia offers a useful contrast. It does not appear in Table 3 and has no Abel laureate in Table 2, but it has a stronger record behind it. Table 1 attributes 30 Nobel Prizes (2.4%) to Russia and the Soviet Union over 1901-2025, which ranks it seventh among countries. Its current absence therefore reflects a decline

from an established position, whereas for China and India it reflects the absence of any such position.

Conclusions

This paper examined the geographical distribution of the Abel Prize and the Nobel Prizes in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, and Economic Sciences over 2017-2026 by the country of the laureate's institutional affiliation at the time of the award.

Two findings emerge. First, the market for scientific excellence remains highly concentrated. For the four Nobel categories, 13 countries account for all 101 laureates, but the United States alone accounts for 66 (65.3%), with at least four laureates in every year. Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan and France account for most of the remainder. Together with the United States, Europe accounts for 92 laureates (91.1%). The Abel Prize is less concentrated, reflecting its smaller sample of 12 laureates across 6 countries, but the same duopoly holds: 50% US and 33.3% Europe, together 83.3%.

Second, the anticipated geographical shift has not materialized in prize recognition. China and India record zero laureates by institutional affiliation in 2017-2026, and have no Abel laureates historically. This is not a recent setback but a continuation of a long-run pattern: by nationality, Table 1 shows only 8 assignments for China (0.6%) and 13 for India (1.0%) over 1901-2025. Because many scientists of Chinese and Indian origin are counted for the US and UK under the institutional method, the result highlights brain drain and brain circulation rather than lack of talent. Russia provides a contrast: with 30 assignments (2.4%) historically it ranks seventh, so its absence in 2017-2026 represents a decline from an established position.

These results should be interpreted with caution. Nobel and Abel Prizes recognize work often done decades earlier and therefore reflect past research environments rather than current performance.

Attribution by institutional affiliation at award time captures Nobel Prize effects but differs from attribution by birth, citizenship, or where the work was done. With these qualifications, the evidence suggests that great universities in the US and Europe continue to act as magnets for top talent, and that despite massive R&D investments, translation into the highest levels of recognized scientific achievement in China and India remains to be observed.

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