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Newton trounces Einstein in vote on their relative merits

By Mark Henderson
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HIS most famous equation, $E=mc^2$, is 100 years old, and 2005 has been named Einstein Year in his honour, but Albert Einstein has been trounced in a scientific beauty contest held to celebrate his own greatest achievements.

The most famous head of hair in science was soundly beaten by Sir Isaac Newton yesterday in a poll on the relative merits of their breakthroughs, with both scientists and the public favouring the Englishman by a surprisingly wide margin.

Asked by the Royal Society to decide which of the two made the more important contributions to science, 61.8 per cent of the public favoured the claims of the 17th-century scientist who developed calculus and the theory of gravity. Among 345 Royal Society scientists who voted, the margin of support for Newton was greater still, with 86.2 per cent deciding that his work was more

important than Einstein's. The vote was closer over who made a bigger positive contribution to humankind in general. Newton was again twice the winner, but with only 50.1 per cent of the public vote and 60.9 per cent of the specialists'.

The results of the online poll were revealed last night at a Royal Society debate on the two physicists' claims to being the greatest of all. Sir Isaac was elected a fellow of the society in 1672, while Einstein was voted a Foreign Member in 1921.

The poll was held as part of the celebrations of Einstein Year, which marks the German-born scientist's *annus mirabilis* of 1905, when he published three papers that laid the foundation of modern physics.

Along with the special theory of relativity and its signature $E=mc^2$ equation, Einstein proved the existence of atoms and explained how light could have the properties of both waves and streams of particles.

Jim Al-Khalili, a professor at the University of Surrey, who

proposed Einstein at the debate last night, said: "Within just a few months during 1905, Einstein published several papers that were to change the face of physics. He proved mathematically that atoms exist. He proved that light is lumpy. It is made up of tiny particles we now call photons and not con-

THE RESULTS

Royal Society scientists

Newton 86.2%
Einstein 13.8%

Members of the public

Newton 61.8%
Einstein 38.2%

tinuous waves. He then published two papers on his theory of relativity, giving us a new view of reality itself."

Einstein should also be favoured, he said, for finding the gaps in Sir Isaac's theories. "He explained that Newton was wrong about the meaning of space and time," Professor Al-Khalili said.

Sir John Enderby, Emeritus Professor of Physics at Bristol University and Vice-President of the Royal Society, argued Sir Isaac's great work, was a foundation stone of the modern scientific method.

Sir John said: "This book set out the mathematical principles of 'natural philosophy' and showed how a universal force, gravity, applied to all objects in all parts of the Universe.

"This amazing insight once and for all ruled out the belief that somehow laws related to Earth-bound objects were in some sense inferior to those which governed the heavens."

Lord May of Oxford, the president of the Royal Society, said: "Many would say that comparing Newton and Einstein is like comparing apples and oranges, but what really matters is that people are appreciating the huge amount that both these physicists achieved, and that their impact on the world stretched far beyond the laboratory and the equation."

