

Exploring the Meaning of Democratic Deliberation over Synthetic Biology

Abstract

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In its 2010 report, *The Ethics of Synthetic Biology and Emerging Technologies*, the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues emphasized “democratic deliberation” as one of five ethical principles that are relevant to the governance of synthetic biology and other emerging technologies. According to the Commission, democratic deliberation involves “an inclusive process of deliberation” among “all stakeholders.” They argued for adopting a deliberative approach to the governance of emerging technologies like synthetic biology because it would promote mutual respect among interest parties and increase the “perceived legitimacy” of the decisions. While this recommendation appears to have merit, it is unclear how to carry it out in practice. In this paper we draw on the literature on deliberative democracy, as well as findings from a Hastings Center project on the ethics of synthetic biology, to explore critically the Presidential Commission’s claims about the benefits of democratic deliberation and highlight the challenges associated with making this principle work in practice. For example, before considering the values of democratic deliberation for the governance of synthetic biology, it is important to distinguish deliberative democracy from other forms of participatory democracy. The latter focuses on the need for greater citizen involvement in governance, while the former is focused on a particular way of making decisions about making policy decisions. Advocates of deliberation as a principle of governance call for a process of reasoned exchange in which participants listen to other as well as voice their own opinions. In contrast to more aggregative theories of democracy, in which the preferences of participants remain fixed, proponents of deliberative democracy envision a process by which participants may change their minds. Deliberation may occur among relatively small, non-representative political actors, so broader participation is not necessary to achieve the goal of making policy decisions through a process of reasoning. Nevertheless, most advocates of deliberative democracy, including the Presidential Commission, call for a more inclusive process. What does this mean, though? Calling for deliberation among “all relevant stakeholders” does not tell us how to identify the relevant stakeholders. This may be a particularly challenging issue for emerging technologies, like new synthetic biofuels, that may have positive and negative externalities that effect people and communities across the globe. Second, although broader participation may help to enhance the legitimacy of policy decisions, there may be tension between the goals of broader participation and *effective* deliberation. Any efforts to create new avenues for public participation in the governance of synthetic biology must negotiate this tension.