

Researcher finds direct democracy in science too much of a good thing

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Publicly funded science in America traditionally is accountable to the people and their government representatives. However, this arrangement raises questions regarding the effect such oversight has on science.

It is a problem of particular relevance in this election year, as the nation prepares for the end of the Bush administration, which has taken strong and divisive stances on a number of scientific issues, including stem cell research and global warming.

Striking such a balance is an essential question for Daniel Sarewitz, director of the Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes at Arizona State University. Sarewitz will present his recent work on direct democracy and public funding of science on Feb. 15 at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting.

Three years ago, Sarewitz presented a paper on the pitfalls of excessive independence in publicly funded research as exemplified by the case of California's Proposition 71. The \$3 billion measure, passed in 2004, was designed to circumvent the Bush administration's restrictions on stem cell research funding. Because it was designed to sidestep government interference, it provided for little to no oversight of the research in question, leading to fears of potential abuse on the one hand and loss of credibility on the other, Sarewitz says.

Sarewitz's upcoming AAAS presentation focuses on the other side of the issue: What is the effect of too much voter involvement in funding

science"

“While increased democratization in the sciences is certainly desirable, direct democracy — putting it to the public to decide which programs are worthy of funding and which are not — is an absurd way to fund science,” Sarewitz says.

“There is a reason that we have representative democracy in this country,” he adds. “It is because it is doubtful that people — with the exception of specifically interested parties — have the time to study and investigate in any detail the topics being voted on.”

Another problem with direct democracy, explains Sarewitz, is that it does not give people an opportunity to choose among a variety of science programs.

“Instead, a ‘political advocacy circus’ is created around an issue — the classic example being Proposition 71, the California stem cell research bond issue of three years ago.”

“Democratization really means a more open process and institutions that are more transparent,” Sarewitz says. “It means expanding the franchise to include public participation in complex decision-making processes.”

Source: Arizona State University

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