

Limits of Democratizing Science.of Democratizing Science: When Scientists Should Ignore the Public

Lots of people want to “democratize science.” I describe and explore one thing that can mean: deferring to the public to make certain methodological decisions that involve ethical, political, social, or personal values. Scientists, for example, might let the public define contested concepts, create classification schemes, weigh the importance of different kinds of error, or determine what types of data analyses will be performed. Deferring to the public on these matters can secure a kind of legitimacy for science.

What, however, are the limits to this deference? Does deferring to the public mean letting the public make these decisions, no matter what? Or can scientists overrule the public when they make poor decisions? Drawing on work in political theory, I argue that democratizing science does require showing substantial deference to the public, including in cases where the public makes what scientists regard as bad decisions. But this deference is not total. I will argue that there are specific types of mistakes that justify scientists in ignoring the public.