Watch the Intelligence Squared GMO Debate

by Karl Haro von Mogel on 3 December 2014

Update: Watch the Debate Live Here.

Tune in Wednesday, December 3rd for a debate on GMOs. Intelligence Squared is hosting a debate between four individuals from two opposing camps, addressing the question of whether or not we should grow genetically engineered foods. Arguing the positive are Robert Fraley from Monsanto and Alison Van Eenennaam from UC Davis, and arguing the negative are Margaret Mellon, formerly of the Union of Concerned Scientists and currently a consultant for the Center for Food Safety, and Charles Benbrook, who is currently at Washington State University. The debate starts at 6:45 pm EST and runs until 8:30 EST, and will be live-streamed. Tune in, and discuss the debate here!

Here's how they frame the debate:

> Genetically modified (GM) foods have been around for decades. Created by modifying the DNA of one organism through the introduction of genes from another, they are developed for a number of different reasons—to fight disease, enhance flavor, resist pests, improve nutrition, survive drought—and are mainly found in our food supply in processed foods using corn, soybeans, and sugar beets, and as feed for farm animals. Across the country and around the world, communities are fighting the cultivation of genetically engineered crops. Are they safe? How do they impact the environment? Can they improve food security? Is the world better off with or without GM food?

The Intelligence Squared debates have an interesting aspect to them, and that is that they ask people to vote for or against the Motion both before and after the debate. Then, they can measure how many people are swayed by the arguments being presented. Here are the short arguments for and against:

> **For The Motion**
>
> GM crops have been safely in our food system for nearly 20 years. There are currently no known harms or risks to human health.
>
> GM crops benefit farmers and the environment by increasing crop yields, reducing the use of pesticides, and reducing the need for tillage.

Food security will be improved through the development of crops that can fight disease, resist pests, improve nutrition, and survive drought.

Against The Motion

The current regulatory system does not adequately assess the safety of GM crops and we cannot be sure of what the long-term effects of consumption will be.

The environmental threats include the possibility of cross-breeding with other plants, harm to non-target organisms, and decreased biodiversity.

The world already grows enough food to feed everyone, but it doesn't get to the people that are hungry. Genetic engineering moves focus away from public policy solutions.

We know from social science research that debates tend to increase polarization rather than find middle ground and change minds. While this will be a good opportunity to hear what each of the participants present as their most formidable arguments and best evidence, it will also inevitably involve rooting for one side and dismissing the arguments of the other. It also tends to introduce a false balance when one side has more evidence than the other – which John Oliver hilariously demonstrated by setting up a debate on global warming on his show.

It will be interesting for me to see some of these participants in the debate, particularly as I have met all but one, and interviewed two (Mellon and Benbrook) and am familiar with many of their primary arguments. Science is not decided by opinion polls after debates, but by evidence and repeatable and testable phenomena. That is the greatest weakness of the claims about risk from GMOs, because no one has been able to demonstrate a repeatable risk to human and animal health. Knowing this, it is logical that they take the weak form of the argument about safety and say that not enough is known. Kevin Folta has his Bingo card ready, expecting scary claims without the evidence to back them up.

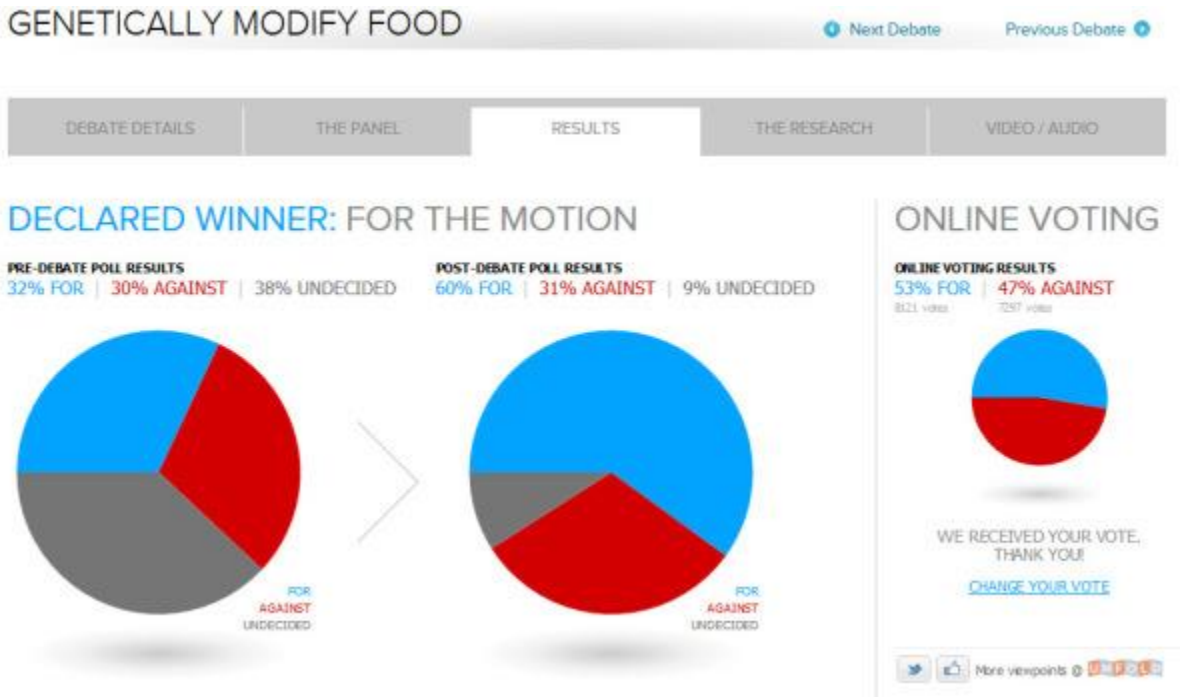
On the flipside, can Van Eenennaam and Fraley convince about low risks without getting bogged down by a Gish Gallop or moving the goalposts? While partisans are certainly convinced about their positions, the vast majority of people are largely undecided. But will they be watching? I'm interested to see how it turns out, and whether it changes any minds.

Gaming the vote?

Scientists aren't the only ones interested in the outcome of the debate. Anti-GMO activist organizations are busy rallying their supporters to watch the debate. That's probably a good thing, as it will allow them to hear one of the other sides in this debate in an unfiltered fashion. The same is true for supporters of both sides. However, one organization, the Institute for Responsible Technology, sent out a newsletter today instructing their followers on how to game the vote. Since Intelligence Squared debates seek to measure a change in opinion, this organization, run by Jeffrey Smith, explained a voting "strategy" to "hold results accountable" (whatever that means). Smith's organization explained to their countless thousands of subscribers that they can vote for the other side before the debate, and then switch their votes after the debate to skew the results!

This shameful tactic is just what we would expect when facts – even something as meaningless as an accurate measurement of a change of opinion from a structured debate – are threatening to some people. This is a microcosm of the wider debate, and another example of the difficulty of having an honest dialog on a politically contentious topic. This is why we can't have nice things.

(The only voting that counts is the voting that occurs with the audience in New York, so it appears that Smith's organization may have been trying to make it seem that the people voting online disagreed with the people in the auditorium. Perhaps that's what they meant by "holding results accountable?")

Update: The debate came to a close tonight with a significant vote change in favor of the motion. Both sides hovered around 30% before the debate, with 38% undecided. At the conclusion of the debate, there was a significant shift of votes from the undecided category to the Yes side, and only a 1% gain by the No side. The final results with only 9% undecided was 60% in favor of the motion, and 31% against. The official winner of the debate was the side in favor of genetically engineered crops.

And the online voting resulted in 53% in favor and 47% against. The attempt to game the vote apparently failed.