

# A Three-Stage Model of Consensus in American Bioethics Commissions

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## 1. Purpose

Previous studies have shown that major consensus obtained in political settings such as advisory commissions follow a two-stage shifting from (i) a “constitutional (pluralistic) consensus” as a compromise of different interests into (ii) an “overlapping consensus” as a representation of common values among different rationales (Jennings 1991; Rawls 2005). Instead of this two-stage model, this paper argues that main consensus actually constitute a three-stage to generate the widespread stability of shared values, for an overlapping consensus can be further classified into two types: narrow and wide.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify what types of consensus the commissioners reached in the case of the ethical principle of justice deliberated by American bioethics commissions and to examine how a constitutional consensus differs from a “wide overlapping consensus,” namely, a common value among at least three different standards.

## 2. Method

This analysis is based on a historical case study of the ethical principle of justice described by the American bioethics commissions (see Nukaga 2016), including the National Commission’s *Belmont Report* (1978), the President’s Commission’s report on *Securing Access to Health Care* (1983), and the President’s Commission’s *Splicing Life* (1982).

## 3. Results

The findings of these cases reveal that major consensus constitute not only (1) a constitutional (pluralistic) consensus and (2) a narrow overlapping consensus as an agreement on two standards in a local setting, but also (3) a wide overlapping consensus as a common value among three different standards, namely, scientific objectivity, ethically inductive reasoning, and ethically deductive reasoning, which was extended to many different settings. A comparative analysis demonstrates that three components, ---the role of reasonable moral persons, the diversity of membership, and communicative action based on wide reflective equilibrium, ----were essential to attain the public stability of the justice principle.

## 4. Conclusion

In contrast to previous studies that interpret major consensus through a two-stage model, this case study concludes that a three-stage consensus model can more correctly represent the transformation from local instability of different standards through local stability of collective standards to extensive stability of common standards.

## References

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- Rawls, John, 2005, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition. New York: Columbia University Press.