

Bush won't budge on stem cells: Hard line could backfire

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President Bush's declaration that he would veto any legislative effort to expand embryonic stem cell research puts his Republican Party between a rock and a hard place politically, making the GOP appear morally and ethically out of touch with the majority of Americans.

The hard line that Bush and his conservative allies have taken on the stem cell issue could backfire just as the hothouse politicizing of the Terri Schiavo case did. In the latter case the White House and some GOP members of Congress took an unequivocal stand on a volatile life-or-death issue. Surveys found it unpopular with the general public.

In comments May 20, Bush said that while he is a "strong supporter" of research using adult stem cells, he had "made it very clear to the Congress that the use of federal money, taxpayers' money, to promote science which destroys life in order to save life is—I'm against that. And therefore, if the bill does that, I will veto it."

Bush's comments anticipated the House's May 24 approval, 238 to 194 (with 50 Republicans in favor), of a bill that would ease restrictions the president imposed on stem cell research in 2001. The vote was far short of the margin required to overturn a veto.

Yet mounting pressure to make scientific and moral advances comes as South Korean scientists announced that they have produced individualized stem cell lines from human-embryo clones of injured or sick patients. In addition, lawmakers in several states—most recently Massachusetts—are pressing ahead with plans to bypass federal restrictions and fund their own stem cell research.

Bush's veto threat ratchets up the conflict on one front in the culture wars that seems to pit self-described "pro-life" and "pro-choice" forces against one another, as in the long and essentially stalemated abortion debate. Indeed, Bush's

language—“science which destroys life in order to save life”—plays to that stark dichotomy.

But the stem cell issue—perhaps because of its more recent vintage, perhaps because the pros and cons are more complex—has yet to harden into the type of ideological, take-no-prisoners dispute that the three-decades-old abortion debate has become, as the wide range of sponsors of the House bill suggests. Supporters of expanding the research include such antiabortion stalwarts as Nancy Reagan and Senator Orrin Hatch (R., Utah). “I do not believe that life begins in a Petri dish and, like many others, hope that these excess embryos can benefit mankind. . . . For me, being pro-life means helping the living,” the *Los Angeles Times* quoted Hatch as saying after the Bush veto threat.

Another supporter, Representative Joe Schwarz (R., Mich.), a doctor and abortion opponent, told the *Times*, “I think this is the most pro-life thing you could do.”

A Gallup poll released earlier in May found that 60 percent of those surveyed considered embryonic stem cell research “morally acceptable.” A December poll by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that as many as 40 percent of self-described social conservatives backed such research, compared with 45 percent who thought it was more important to protect the embryo.

The House bill would allow federal financing for studies on stem cells taken from days-old embryos stored in fertility clinics and donated by couples who no longer need them.

Embryonic stem cells, which can give rise to any type of cell or tissue, are considered to hold great promise for research into a variety of diseases, including Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s and diabetes. Opponents, however, argue that such research is morally unacceptable because embryos are destroyed when the cells are extracted.

The House also approved nearly unanimously a bill to fund research on stem cells taken from umbilical-cord blood and adults. Those cell sources would be equally effective in studies seeking ways to fight disease, according to opponents of embryonic stem cell research. But others say that embryonic stem cell research provides much greater potential for success.

“Government has no business forcing taxpayers to become complicit in the direct destruction of human life at any stage,” Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ committee on pro-life activities, told Congress.

A similar measure in the Senate also has strong bipartisan support, but it too is unlikely to have enough backing to override what would be Bush’s first veto in the five years of his presidency.

For Bush and the Republicans, however, such a veto runs the risk of alienating—as happened in the Schiavo case—not only a large segment of moderate America but also less ideologically driven conservatives. *-Religion News Service*