

Frist splits with Bush on stem-cell research: Majority leader supports expanded federal funding

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The Senate's majority leader, citing his expertise as a physician, has announced that he would support an expansion of federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research. The decision put Senator Bill Frist (R., Tenn.) at odds with the White House and many conservative religious groups.

The fresh support from the Senate's top Republican led colleague Arlen Specter (R., Pa.), to tell CBS-TV's *Face the Nation* on July 31 that he hopes that Senate votes for his bill to expand funding will grow from the earlier-estimated 62 to 67—the number of votes needed to override an expected veto from Bush.

A House version of the bill has already passed but is far short of a two-thirds majority. Specter said he thought the Senate momentum would have “an impact on [lawmakers in] the House who can say, ‘Well, there’s a little political cover.’”

Only days before Capitol Hill lawmakers began their August recess, Frist told senators that “embryonic stem cells uniquely hold specific promise for some therapies and potential cures.” Frist, a heart surgeon, said his medical background leads him to conclude that federal funding for the research must be expanded.

Most conservative religious and anti-abortion groups oppose the research because embryos are destroyed in the process of extracting their stem cells. In one of his first acts after he took office in 2001, Bush limited federal funding for such research.

Many anti-abortion groups have said they prefer research on adult stem cells. But most scientists believe the embryonic cells hold more promise for diseases that are currently considered to be terminal. Bills on Capitol Hill stipulate that researchers could only use frozen embryos that have been created by couples at fertility clinics and would later be discarded.

Frist cast his lot with the latter group. “In all forms of stem-cell research, I see today—just as in 2001—great, great promise to heal,” he said in his speech. “Whether it is diabetes, or Parkinson’s disease, or my own field of heart disease, Lou Gehrig’s disease or spinal cord injuries, stem cells offer hope for treatment that other lines of research simply cannot offer.”

Reaction to his announcement, couched amid speculation that Frist was positioning himself for a possible run for the presidency in 2008, was swift from both sides of the debate.

Focus on the Family founder James C. Dobson said that the pro-life community is “disappointed” in light of Frist’s opposition to abortion. Dobson declared that a “morally sound line must be drawn” against what he called a “suspect and unethical science.”

But Frist’s announcement was welcomed by former first lady Nancy Reagan, whose husband, the late president, suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, and Carlton Veazey, president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. “It’s time to end the ideological stranglehold and pass legislation to fund this life-saving research,” Veazey said.

In an online editorial, Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, wrote that Frist’s decision was a welcome one. “Unfortunately, he made no moral argument for why support for stem-cell research was a pro-life issue,” Parham said. “Fortunately, he carved space in the center of the public square for a reasoned discussion over the balancing act between common-sense ethics and science.”