

The Electoral Politics of Stem Cells

Democratic Myths of 2006, GOP Realities of 2008

When President George W. Bush announced his embryonic stem cell funding policy in August 2001, it was greeted even by many of its opponents as a stroke of political brilliance. “Mr. Bush,” the *New York Times* editorialized regarding his policy, “is turning out to be a skilled triangulator.”

But advocates of embryonic stem cell research funding quickly soured on the policy, and Democrats began to think of the stem cell issue as a potential wedge to drive moderate voters their way. “If we do the work that we can do in this country,” Democratic vice-presidential candidate John Edwards said during the 2004 campaign, “the work that we will do when John Kerry is president, people like Christopher Reeve are going to walk, get up out of that wheelchair and walk again.” It

is hard to imagine a more shameless abuse of hope.

Despite such brazen and manipulative rhetoric, the issue did not appear to have moved many voters in 2004. But the Democrats remained persuaded that it would and, with the help of some liberal Republicans, forced a confrontation in Congress in the summer of 2006. President Bush was forced to use his first veto to defend existing limits on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, and the Democrats believed they had a powerful issue heading into the midterm elections.

Needless to say, the 2006 elections went well for the Democratic Party, but as the dust clears, it is far from obvious that stem cells had anything to do with it. The election in which embryo research played the most sig-

nificant role was the Missouri Senate race between incumbent Republican Jim Talent and Democratic challenger Claire McCaskill. For many months, voters were bombarded by a \$30 million ad campaign promoting a state ballot initiative to make research cloning a state constitutional right, and in the final weeks a \$3 million ad campaign opposing it.

In the end, McCaskill won the Senate race and the cloning amendment passed—in both cases just barely and by nearly identical margins. Democrats have interpreted the vote as a vindication of their stem cell strategy, and they have already promised to make the stem cell question a priority in the next Congress, perhaps giving them an issue to run on, yet again, in 2008.

A closer study of the election data, however, suggests that supporting embryonic stem cells is not the political silver bullet many Democrats believe it is. McCaskill supported the cloning amendment, and Talent opposed it. But according to exit polls (which, of course, must be taken with a grain of salt), more than 20 percent of McCaskill's voters actually voted against the amendment, while 20 percent of Talent's supporters voted in favor of it. In other words, the final tally in the Senate race and in the amendment vote may look very similar, but each slim majority clearly consists of different voters.

In fact, when Missouri voters were asked in a Fox News election day poll how important the stem cell issue was

to them in choosing a Senator, 59 percent of those who said it was extremely important were Talent voters, and only 39 percent were McCaskill voters. Similarly, when voters were asked whether an emotional stem-cell-related pro-McCaskill television ad starring Michael J. Fox affected their decision, only 7 percent said it made them more likely to vote for McCaskill, while 18 percent said it made them less likely to do so. Another 71 percent of voters said it made no difference. It seems the voters most intensely interested in the stem cell issue in Missouri were those *opposed* to embryo-destructive research. But these voters would almost certainly have been Republican voters regardless of stem cells, just as those voters intensely moved by support for the research would almost certainly have voted for McCaskill in any case. Independents split just as they did on other issues.

Beyond Missouri, though the Democrats tried to use stem cell research as a wedge issue in at least a dozen races, it is hard to find any evidence that it moved voters their way or much affected the final outcome at all. Opinion polls also fail to support the notion of strong public support for overturning ethical restrictions on taxpayer funding of embryonic stem cell research. Unlike other “wedge issues,” stem cells never emerge when Americans are asked to volunteer what subjects are most important to them or should be most important to their leaders, and those polls that ask about the issue in a balanced way tend to reveal a

divided, if largely uninterested, public. In late August 2006, *Newsweek* asked registered voters: "Do you favor or oppose using federal tax dollars to fund medical research using stem cells obtained from human embryos?" The question did not mention that to "obtain" the cells you must destroy the embryo, but also did not claim the cells would cure every dreaded disease that afflicts us. Forty-eight percent supported funding, and 40 percent opposed it. When *Newsweek* had asked the identical question two years earlier, 50 percent had supported funding and 36 percent opposed it. In 2005, CBS asked a similar question and found that only 37 percent of Americans supported expanding federal support for the research beyond President Bush's current funding policy.

But whether the public cares or not, Democrats still seem persuaded that stem cells are a major winner for them. They are eager to force President Bush to veto a stem cell funding bill yet again, and they are ready to sell themselves as the party of progress in 2008. From what we've seen so far, however, the stem cell issue will probably not matter much in the general election. And since every conceivable Democratic candidate for president supports unbounded funding of embryonic stem cell research, it will not matter at all in the Democratic primary.

On the Republican side, however, things are much more complicated, and it is possible that stem cells could become a significant litmus test and major factor in the looming presi-

dential primary. As the Missouri data show, committed conservatives clearly care about it. The party's presidential hopefuls, however, are divided. Arizona Senator John McCain, for instance, voted in favor of the bill to overturn the President's funding policy in July 2006, and has expressed support for embryo-destructive research. Former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani has also said he believes federal support for the research should be expanded beyond President Bush's policy. The two supposed front-runners thus find themselves deeply at odds with the socially conservative base of the party.

On the other hand, Kansas Senator Sam Brownback, who is also exploring a White House run, has been one of the leading opponents of embryo-destructive research in Congress, and is to the right of the president on the issue, believing Bush's policy comes too close to encouraging the destruction of embryos. Brownback is not an outright opponent of the Bush policy, but he has said that were it up to him, he would allow no taxpayer funding of embryonic stem cell research at all. Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, also rumored to be considering a run, is a former Baptist minister who objects to the destruction of embryos for research.

The most interesting case of all is outgoing Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. In one sense, Romney has been among the most prominent defenders of nascent human life in recent years, as he fought Harvard University's efforts to initiate a project of human cloning for research purpos-

es. Romney has made it known that the lessons he learned by thinking through the stem cell issue have led him to move to the right on the life issues more generally. He has, he says, become a proliferator because of the stem cell debate. In his appeal to evangelicals, he can claim a stem cell conversion.

At the same time, however, Romney's specific proposal in Massachusetts would have allowed the use of so-called "spare" embryos, those left frozen in in vitro fertilization (IVF) clinics after their parents do not want any more children, and made available by those parents for scientific experimentation. This puts Romney at odds with President Bush—whose policy explicitly avoids supporting the ongoing destruction and use of such embryos—and with the great bulk of social conservatives whose support he desperately needs in order to be the serious alternative to McCain and Giuliani. Romney has not yet made it clear whether this permissive position on the "spares" was a tactical concession made in the midst of his stem cell conversion or whether it is his considered moral and political judgment. So far, he has kept his options open, though his fervent public sup-

port for the exploration of alternative avenues for developing embryonic-like cells suggest he is inclined to oppose the destruction of any human embryos for research.

Even if American voters in general seem relatively unmoved by the stem cell debate, potential Republican candidates should have no doubt that their own party's voters, particularly in critical conservative states like Iowa and South Carolina, will care a great deal. While stem cells may not matter in the general election, they could become a defining issue of the Republican primary campaigns, the issue that separates a slate of candidates who are all tough on defense and in favor of tax cuts. McCain's and Giuliani's views, which are mostly still not known by potential Republican primary voters, will certainly hurt them when the time comes. Brownback's views on the issue are among his greatest strengths, and Huckabee's will help him in these early primaries as well. But it is Romney whose political fate probably lies with the embryo.

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