

Election Could Turn on Stem-Cell Issue

Bush's barriers to research will cost him votes.

By Robert Beckel

August 27, 2004

Stem-cell research may lead to cures for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. It also may lead John Kerry to the White House.

Stem cells are lines of cells from embryos created to aid couples having difficulty conceiving. The partners' egg and sperm are coaxed together outside the womb and then implanted in the woman. The embryos not used are either frozen or discarded. Stem cells are drawn from these embryos and then grown into lines for research.

There are tens of millions of Americans who suffer from diseases and injuries that stem-cell research could cure or prevent. Add family members and caregivers who provide assistance to these patients and the number of Americans affected comes close to 100 million. That's a lot of people and a lot of votes.

Independent polls confirm the issue's potency. In a recent poll by Opinion Research Corp., 72% of respondents said they supported stem-cell research — including an astounding 62% of fundamentalist Christians.

Underscoring stem-cell research's political weight was a Zogby International poll for American Demographics magazine this month that tested what issues would cause voters to change their choice for president. The poll showed that if Kerry announced a plan for a federally funded program for stem-cell research, it would move 11% of Bush supporters to his camp. No other issue came close to changing so many voters' minds.

The politics are not complicated. In August 2001, President Bush made it clear that stem-cell research was not simply a scientific question but was an ethical one as well. He conceded that the research showed promise, but he limited federally funded research to the 78 stem-cell lines available at that time, only 19 of which have survived.

To do more, he said, would be morally difficult for him because "I believe human life is a sacred gift from our creator."

Kerry seized the issue. He supports extensive federal funding for stem-cell research and incorporates the issue as a major part of his stump speech. With the race for president so close and the number of voters who say they favor stem-cell research so large, it may well be the wedge issue for 2004.

Stem-cell research also has the potential for becoming a major problem for Bush. Former supporters of the president's position, including conservative Republican Sens. Orrin G. Hatch of Utah and Trent Lott of Mississippi, have changed their positions in the face of public pressure. And other Republicans up for reelection have done their best to avoid the

issue. But Bush can't run from it.

To waver on a "moral issue" would look blatantly political. And he will face formidable pressure to do so. After former President Reagan died following a 10-year battle with Alzheimer's, his widow, Nancy, publicly opposed Bush's position. She now strongly supports stem-cell research.

Kerry and the Democrats received even more help from Reagan's son Ron, who spoke at the Democratic National Convention and movingly declared that "the theology of a few should not dictate the health and lives of the many."

He ended his speech by saying, "Whatever else you do come Nov. 2, I urge you, please, cast a vote for embryonic stem-cell research." For George Bush, that is not a subtle message.

*

Robert Beckel is a political analyst and professor of political strategy at George Washington University. He is a commentator for the Fox News Network and was national campaign manager for Walter Mondale in 1984.