

VOTERS' VIEWS ON STEM CELL RESEARCH

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The Civil Society Institute**

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Introduction

From March 24 to 29, 2004, Peter D. Hart Research Associates conducted a telephone survey on behalf of the Civil Society Institute. This survey was conducted among registered voters in 18 states and was designed to explore public opinion on federal funding for stem cell research. The states included were Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Maine, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, and West Virginia. With 802 interviews, the margin of error for this survey is $\pm 3.5\%$, with larger margins of error for subgroups.

Knowledge and Impact of Stem Cell Issue

Public knowledge of stem cell research has increased over the past few years. Three in four (76%) voters say that they have heard a lot or a little about medical research involving embryonic stem cells, up from 69% of voters nationally in August 2001¹. Nearly one-third (31%) of voters affirm hearing a lot, an increase from August 2001 when 25% claimed the same level of knowledge about stem cell research.

Nearly all have a personal connection to the issue. Nearly every (86%) voter reports having a family member or close friend who potentially could benefit from stem cell research. More than two-thirds (68%) have some experience with cancer, and more than half (58%) have been affected by heart disease. Aside from these two more widespread diseases, 49% of voters report having a close personal friend or family member who has suffered from Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, juvenile diabetes, or spinal cord injury—and thus could be affected by medical research on stem cells.

¹ Virginia Commonwealth University survey, conducted 8/29-9/2/01; surveyed 1,122 adults nationwide; margin of error $\pm 3\%$ (release, 10/4/01).

Voters strongly support federal funding for medical research. Even when compared with other items such as national defense, transportation, or education, 59% of voters say that federal funding for medical research should be a high priority, including 31% who say that it should be a very high priority. Another 35% say that funding for medical research should be a moderate priority. Just 6% do not see medical research funding as a priority for the federal government. Support is higher among Democrats (64%) than among Republicans (46%), and is highest among the politically important independents (67%).

A majority of voters in these states support embryonic stem cell research.

Overall, voters favor stem cell research by 53% to 30%. This is an increase in support from the August 2001 survey, when voters nationwide expressed support for embryonic stem cell research by only 48% to 43%.

Democrats and Republicans offer different views on embryonic stem cell research (in the demographics portion of the survey, voters were asked whether they would describe their overall point of view in terms of the political parties as Democratic, Republican, or completely independent). Democrats favor stem cell research by a 46-point margin (65% to 19%), whereas Republicans oppose stem cell research by a nine-point margin (47% to 38%). However, independents have a view that is much closer to Democrats' than Republicans', as independent voters favor stem cell research by a 32-point margin (55% to 23%). In political terms, the center of the electorate clearly embraces the importance of stem cell research.

| INITIAL VIEW OF STEM CELL RESEARCH AMONG KEY SUBGROUPS | | | |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| | <u>Favor</u> | <u>Oppose</u> | <u>Margin In_</u> |
| | <u>%</u> | <u>%</u> | <u>Favor</u> |
| | | | <u>%</u> |
| <i>All Voters</i> | 53 | 30 | +23 |
| Men | 53 | 30 | +23 |
| Women | 53 | 30 | +23 |
| Ages 18-39 | 52 | 28 | +24 |
| Ages 40-59 | 57 | 28 | +29 |
| Ages 60 and over | 49 | 34 | +15 |
| Non-college educated | 48 | 33 | +15 |
| 4-year college grads | 56 | 27 | +29 |
| Postgraduates | 74 | 20 | +54 |
| Mainline Protestants | 59 | 23 | +36 |
| Evangelicals | 34 | 53 | -19 |
| Catholics | 54 | 29 | +25 |
| Democrats | 65 | 19 | +46 |
| Independents | 55 | 23 | +32 |
| Republicans | 38 | 47 | -9 |

Support increases with education level, as 63% of college graduates favor stem cell research compared with 48% of non-college voters who say the same. Support is even higher among those with a postgraduate degree: nearly three in four (74%) say that they strongly or somewhat support embryonic stem cell research. Along gender lines, support is equal among men (53%) and women (53%). College men (61%) are much more likely than are non-college men (49%) to favor stem cell research, and the education gap is even greater among women, with 65% of college women and just 47% of non-college women favoring stem cell research.

Dividing the states into regions shows that a majority of voters in the West (60%), rural Midwest (54%), Northeast (52%), and South (52%) support stem cell research, along with a large plurality in the industrial Midwest (49%). Religion is another strong predictor of voters' views on stem cell research. As expected, support is low among Evangelical Protestants (34%)

but much stronger among mainline Protestants (59%). Significantly, Catholics (54%) support stem cell research nearly as strongly as the mainline Protestants.

Analysis also reveals that the more people have heard about the issue, the more they support stem cell research. Voters who say that they know a lot about the issue support stem cell research by 68% to 26%, whereas voters who say that they know little about the issue support it by a much smaller 36% to 30%.

Support grows with more information. Support for embryonic stem cell research increases 13 percentage points to 66% when people are informed that couples are donating unwanted embryos that otherwise would be discarded. After hearing a more detailed description of embryonic stem cell research and the diseases it can help cure, support grows even more. Overall, three in four (76%) voters support stem cell research after hearing the following description:

Embryonic stem cells are special cells that can develop into every type of cell in the human body. The stem cells are extracted from frozen embryos in fertility clinics, donated by couples who no longer want or need the embryo. This process destroys the embryo. These stem cells can then reproduce on their own, creating what is called a "line" of stem cells that many researchers can work with. Scientists believe that there is a good chance that stem cells can be developed into cures or treatments for diseases such as cancer, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, juvenile diabetes, and spinal cord injuries.

Clearly, the potential of stem cell research to produce treatments for a wide range of diseases and conditions is a very powerful consideration for voters. Even subgroups originally resistant to the idea, such as Evangelicals and Republicans, support stem cell research after hearing a description of the process and potential of the research, despite the explicit recognition of the embryo destruction required.

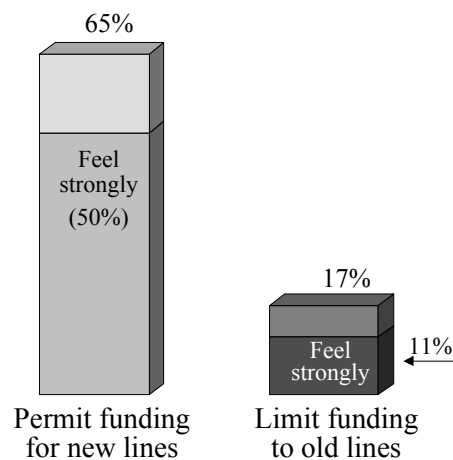
A large majority of voters in these states would change the Bush Administration's August 2001 policy restricting embryonic stem cell research.

More than two-thirds (68%) of voters support the three longstanding criteria for federal government funding of stem cell research: (1) the cells must come from an embryo that was created for reproductive purposes and is no longer needed, (2) researchers must obtain the consent of the couple donating the embryo, and (3) the donors cannot be paid for use of the embryo.

In August 2001, the Bush Administration established a new restriction on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. This restriction says that research on stem cell lines created before August 2001 can receive funding, but funding is prohibited for research on stem cell lines developed after that date. However, the survey results reveal that voters overwhelmingly oppose this restriction and favor funding for research using newer stem cell lines. Fully 65% support expanding federal government funding for stem cell lines created after August 2001, including 50% who feel strongly, compared with only 17% who support maintaining the Bush Administration's August 2001 restrictions.

Majority Wants To Change Bush Administration Policy

Should federal funding for stem cell research be limited only to stem cell lines created before August 2001 (Bush administration restriction), or should funding be permitted for newer stem cell lines that meet other federal ethics regulations?



Key political groups, such as independents and persuadable voters, strongly support a policy allowing federal funding for research on newer stem cell lines. As the accompanying table shows, the August 2001 restrictions garner relatively little support even among groups not favorable to stem cell research initially, such as Republicans, Evangelicals, and conservatives.

| FEDERAL FUNDING SHOULD BE... | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| | Permitted For New Cell Lines | Limited To Old Cell Lines | Margin For New Policy |
| | % | % | % |
| <i>All Voters</i> | 65 | 17 | +48 |
| Men | 63 | 20 | +43 |
| Women | 67 | 13 | +54 |
| Ages 18-39 | 66 | 16 | +50 |
| Ages 40-59 | 67 | 18 | +49 |
| Ages 60 and over | 62 | 14 | +48 |
| Mainline Protestants | 69 | 13 | +56 |
| Evangelicals | 46 | 30 | +16 |
| Catholics | 70 | 15 | +55 |
| Democrats | 78 | 10 | +68 |
| Independents | 70 | 11 | +59 |
| Republicans | 47 | 27 | +20 |
| Liberals | 65 | 17 | +48 |
| Moderates | 80 | 9 | +71 |
| Conservatives | 44 | 28 | +16 |

It is important to note that strong majorities of voters disagree with the two primary justifications for the August 2001 restriction: 1) that there are enough stem cell lines that were created before August 2001 to support research needs, and 2) that the government should not create an incentive to destroy more embryos by funding research on them.

On the topic of the number of viable stem cell lines available for research, voters were read statements from both supporters and opponents of the Bush Administration's August 2001 policy and were asked which statement they agree with more.

Statement A: People who support the Bush Administration's policy say that there already are sufficient embryonic stem cell lines to meet the needs of researchers. The Bush Administration's policy will allow stem cell research to move forward and help cure diseases, without violating our ethical standards by supporting the destruction of additional embryos.

Statement B: People who support funding for research using newer stem cell lines point out that when the Bush Administration's policy was created, people thought there were at least seventy stem cell lines available for research. But it turns out there are only fifteen lines available, and almost all researchers agree that many more are needed for stem cell research to fulfill its promise. Given these new facts, we need a new policy that allows life-saving research to proceed.

Again, after hearing statements from both sides of the debate, a large majority (65%) agree with those who favor expanded funding for newer stem cell lines, with 49% who feel strongly. Fewer than one in four voters (23%) agree that funding should be limited to the old stem cell lines, including 16% who feel strongly.

On the topic of destruction of embryos, voters again were presented with statements from opponents and supporters of expanding federal funding for use in research on newer stem cell lines, and were asked which statement they agree with more.

Statement A: People who support the Bush Administration's policy say that funding for the old stem cell lines is right because those embryos already had been destroyed, but if funding is made available for research on newer stem cell lines it will create an incentive for the destruction of additional embryos. They say it is wrong for the government to support or encourage the destruction of human embryos.

Statement B: People who support federal funding for research using newer stem cell lines say these newer stem cells will come from embryos in fertility clinics that are voluntarily donated by couples who no longer need or want them and they likely will be discarded. They say there are already tens of thousands of such frozen embryos that will be discarded by their donors if they are not used for research. It only makes sense to use these embryos to cure diseases and save lives.

Again, by a more than two to one, voters solidly agree with supporters of federal funding on newer stem cell lines, as 66% of voters say that they agree with the supporters of expanded federal funding, including 51% who strongly agree. On the other side of the coin, just 24% agree that funding should be limited to the old stem cell lines, including 18% who feel strongly.

Voters in these states are more persuaded by arguments in favor of allowing research than by arguments in favor of the August 2001 restriction.

The survey presented voters with the strongest arguments made by both sides of the stem cell debate. The most persuasive argument tested in favor of the Bush Administration's policy of limited funding for stem cell research is that there should be more comprehensive research on stem cell lines from adults, umbilical cords, and animals to gauge their usefulness before more embryos are destroyed. Half (50%) of voters find this argument very or fairly convincing, and a nearly equal proportion (47%) say that it is just somewhat or not at all convincing. Other arguments in favor of the administration's policy—that embryonic stem cell research is immoral, that it is possibly unethical, that it is exploitative of a human life—generally prove less persuasive to voters.

REASONS TO SUPPORT THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S POLICY

(PROPORTION SAYING EACH IS A VERY/FAIRLY CONVINCING REASON)

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 50% | In addition to embryonic stem cell lines, there are many stem cell lines available to researchers that come from adult humans, umbilical cords that are discarded after birth, and animals. We should first see whether these stem cells can provide the cures and treatments we need, before destroying more human embryos. |
| 43% | Under the current policy, there already are sufficient stem cell lines available for researchers to begin exploring the potential of stem cell research. We do not know yet whether additional stem cell lines are needed, and until we do, we should maintain the strongest protections possible against exploitation of human life. |
| 35% | For the sake of moral principle and human dignity, it is time that we draw the line. Banning federal government funding for research on newer stem cell lines is a good way to make sure that embryos are not created and destroyed for research purposes. |
| 32% | Pro-life organizations believe that it is immoral to destroy living human embryos, even for medical research. |
| 32% | Research on embryonic stem cells raises profound ethical questions, because extracting the stem cell destroys the embryo, and thus destroys its potential for life. It is wrong to provide taxpayer funding to research that sanctions and encourages the future destruction of human embryos. |
| 30% | There is no such thing as an excess life, and the fact that a living embryo is going to be discarded does not justify experimenting on it or exploiting it as a natural resource. |
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Voters agree more with arguments for allowing research on newer stem cell lines. The most convincing argument is that embryonic stem cell research is similar to organ donation in that neither organ donors nor frozen embryos will live and that there is a great medical need for both (69% very/fairly convincing). Two-thirds (65%) of voters agree that our government should support rather than stand in the way of research that will help ease the suffering of more

than 100 million Americans who are suffering from diabetes, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and other diseases and conditions.

REASONS TO FUND RESEARCH ON NEWER CELL LINES

(PROPORTION SAYING EACH IS A VERY/FAIRLY CONVINCING REASON)

- 69% This issue is very similar to organ donation. Neither frozen embryos nor organ donors are going to live, and in both cases there is an urgent medical need that can be filled by the donation of needed tissue. Just like organ donation, stem cell research can save millions of lives.
 - 65% Stem cell research offers the best hope we have today for curing such diseases as Alzheimer's, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, which today cause pain and suffering to more than 100 million Americans. Our government should be fully supporting this research, not standing in the way.
 - 63% Currently fertilization clinics in the United States have tens of thousands of embryos that have been donated by couples who no longer need or want them. If these embryos cannot be used in stem cell research, they will simply be discarded by the donors, and no benefits at all will be derived from them.
 - 63% Highly respected organizations such as the AMA, National Academy of Sciences, National Institutes of Health, Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, and Alzheimer's Association strongly support allowing research on newer stem cell lines.
 - 58% Nancy Reagan, Michael J. Fox, and Christopher Reeve all support funding for research on newer stem cell lines, because they know it represents the best chance we have to prevent suffering from Alzheimer's, Parkinson's disease, spinal cord injuries, and other afflictions.
 - 56% When the Bush Administration's policy was established, it was believed that there were 78 stem cell lines available for research. But it turns out there are only 15 lines that meet the Bush Administration's conditions, and researchers agree that many more are needed to move forward with meaningful stem cell research.
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Sixty-three percent of voters are convinced by the argument that if embryos that donors no longer need are not used for research, fertility clinics will simply discard them with no benefit to medical research. An equal proportion find the support of the American Medical Association, the National Academy of Science, National Institutes of Health, the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, and the Alzheimer's Association of research on new stem cell lines a convincing reason to lift the August 2001 restrictions on federal funding.

Many supporters of changing the August 2001 restriction are seen as highly trustworthy sources of information on the issue of stem cell research. Two-thirds or more of voters say that they trust the information provided by a number of stem cell research supporters, including 87% who say they trust information from health organizations such as the American Medical

Association and the Alzheimer's Association. Additionally, the opinions of celebrities who favor funding for newer cell lines, such as Mary Tyler Moore (75%), chairwoman of the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation; Christopher Reeve (73%), founder of the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation; Michael J. Fox (67%), founder of the Michael J. Fox Parkinson's Research Foundation; and Nancy Reagan (65%) are considered trustworthy. These findings indicate that not only do the arguments in favor of expanded stem cell research resonate strongly with voters, they also consider the individuals and organizations making these arguments to be highly credible.

After hearing arguments from both sides, support for research on new cell lines remains high.

Total support climbs four percentage points to 69%, and strong support increases eight points to 58%, whereas support for the 2001 Bush Administration's policy is just 20%. Clearly, voters broadly favor dropping the August 2001 Bush Administration restrictions and allowing research funding to include using newer stem cell lines. Further debate is likely to strengthen, not weaken, that consensus.