

New battle lines drawn on stem cells

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Faced with a new federal policy that opens the door for more embryonic stem cell research, conservatives have geared up for a political battle at the national and state level that goes to the core of their beliefs about the sanctity of human life.

Since President [Barack Obama](#) lifted the eight-year ban on nearly all federal funding for [stem cell research](#) on Monday, conservative leaders said they have stepped up efforts to lobby Congress to preserve some restrictions. They plan to launch a far-reaching campaign to educate the public about the threat to life as well as research alternatives that are not as invasive.

"This executive order is just the beginning of the process. Our concern is how broad this will be interpreted, and will there be limitations," said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative think tank. "With limited tax dollars available, we should not use those funds for research that is at best morally questionable."

Embryonic stem cell research has long been a divisive issue in the U.S., pitting opponents who argue that cultivating or destroying [human embryos](#) is morally wrong against supporters who tout the potentially life-saving qualities of the studies. Ethical debates have been waged in Congress, the public and within the religious community since researchers at the University of Wisconsin successfully harvested the first [stem cells](#) from human embryos in 1995.

Lifting of the ban imposed by former President George W. Bush in 2001

will likely spark a new round of heated debate in Washington as the National Institutes of Health develops new parameters for the policy and if Congress considers legislation to protect future funding measures. Several states in recent years have lined up on either side of the issue, taking steps to promote new research despite the shortage of funds or passing laws to restrict studies.

Since Bush restricted funding to about 60 embryonic stem cell lines that existed prior to 2001, some states passed legislation allocating funds or allowing for private donations, positioning themselves as leaders in the field once the new federal dollars start rolling in to research hundreds of new stem cell lines that have become available. Eight states - California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Wisconsin - have passed legislation to move ahead with research despite the federal ban, according to lists compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures. Research is legal in Iowa and Missouri, though no funding was included in the legislation. Stem cell research is restricted in Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, North Dakota and South Dakota, though in some cases, the courts have not yet ruled whether the legislation is legal.

Conservative leaders said they plan to lobby Congress to preserve the Dickey-Wicker Amendment, which makes it illegal to use federal funds for research that creates or destroys human embryos. They also plan to advocate the use of induced pluripotent stem cells, which are artificially derived from adult cells, as an alternative to [embryonic stem cells](#).

"We have no problem with research that does not result in the death of embryos. This would provide all the stem cell material necessary for research without causing unborn babies to be killed," said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. "This is very important to our community and it will make a difference in how many of their constituents get their vote."

The problem with legislation that attempts to establish the beginning of life is that there is no clear mechanism to determine if or how those living beings should be afforded the same constitutional and legal rights as humans, bioethicists said. Such attempts have failed in several states, including South Carolina and Colorado. The language, bioethicists said, also is contradictory because it attempts to guard against using embryos for research while supporting their use in reproduction.

"It is a problematic strategy because when you define an embryo as a person, what they say is, therefore you cannot destroy them," said Paul Wolpe, director of the Center for Ethics at Emory University. "My response is, therefore you cannot freeze them. How can you freeze a person and keep them suspended in animation? The idea that they can pick and choose which aspect of human life will be relevant is interesting."

Americans have generally supported embryonic stem cell research, hoping that in time it will result in a cure for spinal cord injuries and illnesses such as Parkinson's Disease and diabetes. According to a Gallup poll conducted last month, 38 percent of Americans said they supported easing the restrictions on research and another 14 percent said they favored no restrictions at all. Only four in 10 Americans said they favored keeping the Bush restrictions or eliminating all federal funding.

Part of the reason for the great debate is the division within the religious community, as well as among conservatives in general, over the issue, Wolpe said. While the Roman Catholic Church, Southern Baptists and many evangelicals oppose the use of human embryos for research, positions vary widely within the overall religious community. As a result, bioethicists said, conservative Republicans have not been able to make stem cell research a rallying cause among their base.

"On one hand, people want the cures that the stem cell research brings,"

Wolpe said. "But they also want a law that acknowledges the respect we should have for embryos. They don't want them to be treated merely as raw material for scientific research."

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