

Public Backs Stem-Cell Research by 2-1; Catholics in Favor, Conservatives Divide

Americans by a 2-1 margin support stem-cell research and say it should be funded by the federal government, despite controversy over its use of human embryos.

Advocates of this research say it can produce new treatments for disease, while critics oppose using embryos in research. After hearing these competing views, 58 percent of Americans support stem-cell research, 30 percent oppose it. Six in 10 also say the federal government should fund it.

Stem-cell research:			
Personal view		Government funding	
Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose
58%	30	60%	31

FEDERAL FUNDING – George W. Bush is considering whether to continue a Clinton administration policy allowing federal funding of stem-cell research. Bush was reported last week to be leaning against it, given opposition from some political conservatives, anti-abortion groups and the Catholic Church. Catholics are swing voters.

This ABC News/Beliefnet poll, however, finds that people in these groups do not broadly oppose stem-cell research. Catholics support it personally by a margin of 54-35 percent, and favor its federal funding by a slightly wider margin, 60-32 percent. (A small share of Catholics oppose the research personally, but support its funding as a matter of policy.)

Conservatives divide evenly on stem-cell research. More Republicans support it than oppose it. Among evangelical white Protestants – a conservative, largely anti-abortion, core-Bush group – 50 percent support it, while 40 percent are opposed. Even among opponents of legal abortion, opposition to stem-cell research falls just short of a majority, at 50 percent.

Indeed, one of the groups that's least supportive of stem-cell research is blacks – the most solidly Democratic group in the nation. Forty-four percent of blacks personally oppose stem-cell research, 15 points higher than the level of opposition among whites.

Support for stem-cell research is much higher, moreover, among centrist groups that are also of interest to Bush politically – such as independents (62 percent support stem-cell research), moderates (63 percent) and non-evangelical white Protestants (70 percent).

	Stem-cell research	
	Support	Oppose
Religion:		
Evangelical		
white Protestants	50%	40
White Catholics	54	35
Non-evangelical		
white Protestants	70	18
Ideology:		
Conservatives	44%	44
Moderates	63	26
Liberals	76	14
Politics:		
Republicans	49%	37
Independents	62	26
Democrats	65	27
Abortion:		
Legal	76%	15
Illegal	39	50
Race:		
Whites	60%	29
Blacks	48	44

Among all groups examined in this poll, opposition to stem-cell research is highest – 58 percent – among people who think abortion should be illegal in all cases (they account for one in five Americans). More moderate abortion opponents, who think abortion should be mostly, but not always, illegal, divide about evenly on stem-cell research.

WHAT IT IS – Stem cells are the building blocks of the human body; scientists say they can help in the development of treatments for ailments including stroke, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases, spinal cord injury and burns. In May the National Institutes of Health said stem-cell research holds “enormous promise” and “has the potential to revolutionize the practice of medicine and improve the quality and length of life.” (<http://www.nih.gov/news/stemcell/primer.htm>)

Scientists grow stem cells from leftover fertilized eggs, or embryos, that are produced at fertility clinics and not needed for implantation. Federal law bans the use of tax money for research that destroys embryos; the Clinton policy allows federal funding for stem-cell research so long as private funding is used to remove the cells from the embryos.

INFLUENCES – Religious beliefs play a sizable role in informing the minority opposition to stem-cell research, while news coverage and education are the biggest self-reported influences in support for the research.

Among the three in 10 adults who oppose stem-cell research, 42 percent say their religious beliefs had the most influence on their opinion – making religion the most significant factor in this opposition by a wide margin. Nonetheless, that still leaves a

majority of opponents who cite other chief influences, including personal non-religious beliefs (17 percent), news accounts (13 percent) and personal experiences (nine percent).

Among the nearly six in 10 who support stem-cell research, 28 percent cite news accounts as the main factor in their view, 22 percent cite their education and 17 percent cite their personal non-religious beliefs. Only three percent cite religious views.

Chief factors in views on stem-cell research:	Among stem-cell research	
	Supporters	Opponents
Religious beliefs	3%	42
Things read/seen in the news	28	13
Education	22	6
Personal non-religious beliefs	17	17
Personal experience	8	9
Opinions of family and friends	6	3
Something else	13	9

Thus the biggest self-reported influences are the news, cited by 22 percent of all adults; religious beliefs, and personal non-religious beliefs, at 16 percent apiece; and education, at 15 percent.

LANGUAGE – There’s been little independent public opinion polling on stem-cell research, and recent interest-group polling has used language that produced lopsided results in opposite directions.

In a poll it released last month, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops posed the issue by saying “live embryos would be destroyed” for undefined “experiments”; it found 70 percent opposed. By contrast, a pro-research poll didn’t mention embryos, referring to “excess fertilized eggs” and listing seven “deadly diseases” the research could help treat. It found 77 percent in favor.

Given its effectiveness, it’s likely such language will continue from advocates on both sides as they seek to influence public opinion on the issue – opponents talking about destroying human embryos for experimentation; proponents talking about using discarded fertilized eggs for lifesaving medical research.

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Beliefnet poll was conducted by telephone June 20-24, 2001, among a random national sample of 1,022 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Fieldwork by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet, at:
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results (*= less than 0.5 percent):

1. Sometimes fertility clinics produce extra fertilized eggs, also called embryos, that are not implanted in a woman's womb. These extra embryos either are discarded, or couples can donate them for use in medical research called stem-cell research. Some people (support stem-cell research, saying it's an important way to find treatments for many diseases). Other people (oppose stem-cell research, saying it's wrong to use any human embryos for research purposes). What about you - do you support or oppose stem-cell research?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
6/24/01	58	30	12

2. The federal government provides funding to support a variety of medical research. Do you think federal funding for medical research should or should not include funding for stem-cell research?

	Should	Should not	No opinion
6/24/01	60	31	9

3. What's had the most influence on your opinion on the issue of stem-cell research - (ROTATE) the opinions of your family and friends, things you've seen or read in the news, your education, your personal experience, your religious beliefs, (ALWAYS ASK NEXT) your personal non-religious beliefs, or (ASK LAST) something else?

6/24/01

	Family/ friends	News	Educ.	Exper.	Relig. beliefs	Non-relig. beliefs	Other	No op.
All	5	22	15	8	16	16	13	6
Support	6	28	22	8	3	17	13	3
Oppose	3	13	6	9	42	17	9	3

4. Held for release

5. Held for release

END