

Stem cell bill vetoed amid political moves: Restrictions on research funding maintained

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President Bush exercised the first veto of his presidency to reject a bill that would have expanded federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

The legislation that Bush vetoed July 18 was passed by the Senate on a bipartisan 63-37 vote the day before, and by the House of Representatives in 2005. It would have lifted restrictions imposed by the president in 2001 on U.S. funds for stem cell research.

While many medical groups argue that the research holds the promise of cures for a variety of illnesses, conservative Christians and the Catholic Church lambaste it because it involves the destruction of human embryos.

Speaking at a White House event that included young children from the embryo program of a Christian adoption agency, Bush said that “these boys and girls are not spare parts.” Bush said the bill “crosses a moral boundary that our decent society needs to respect, so I vetoed it.”

Representative Diana DeGette (D., Colo.), a leading sponsor of the bill in the House, declared, “Vetoing this bill is one of the greatest mistakes of his presidency.” But other analysts saw Bush’s action not only as an act of conscience but also as a step to maintain his strong backing from conservative Christians.

“It will be a powerful symbol that the president keeps his word,” said John Green, senior fellow of the Washington-based Pew Forum. “Overall, the stem cell debate does not generate as much intensity as abortion or gay rights,” he said.

“Nevertheless, it’s . . . often connected to conservative views on abortion and gay marriage.”

Same-sex marriage was the topic for another series of predictable votes on Capitol Hill. The House, on July 18, favored by a vote of 236 to 187 a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, but that was short of the two-thirds majority needed.

Noting that polls show most Americans support traditional marriage, Representative Marilyn N. Musgrave (R., Colo.), the amendment's sponsor, said, "The people have a right to know whether their elected representatives agree with them."

The Senate, which had rejected the measure the previous month, had effectively killed the amendment's chances this year, but many analysts considered the new House vote as a way to hurt incumbent Democrats this fall in moderate and conservative districts. "Shame on this House for playing politics with bigotry," said Democratic Representative Jerrold Nadler of New York.

Opponents of the amendment indicated that the vote in the House was not so urgent in light of recent setbacks to same-sex marriage in state and federal courts. On July 14 a federal panel reinstated a particularly restrictive Nebraska ban on gay marriage and domestic partnership rights, and the Tennessee Supreme Court said a gay marriage ban could go on that state's November ballot.

Those decisions came a week after the judges on New York's highest court declined to follow the lead of their colleagues in Massachusetts, ruling 4-2 that the New York constitution does not require the legalization of gay marriage.

Additional issues with patriotic and religious elements passed by the Republican majority in the House came under fire in mid-July from Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "This is election-year pandering at its worst," said Americans United director Barry Lynn.

The House passed a bill 349 to 74 to transfer ownership of the disputed Mount Soledad cross on San Diego city-owned land to the federal government in order to bypass a protracted federal court case initiated by a plaintiff seeking the cross's removal. By a vote of 260 to 167, the House also approved a bill that would strip the Supreme Court and other federal courts of the authority to hear legal challenges to the Pledge of Allegiance and its phrase "under God."