

BRIAN DICKERSON: Talk about stem cells? GOP would rather not

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One reason Republicans are anxious to make the next election about homeland security or jobs is that it's a way of making sure the election *isn't* about stem-cell research, an issue on which GOP candidates across the ballot have staked out a singularly unpopular position.

At the congressional level, every southeast Michigan Republican seeking re-election to the U.S. House this November supported President George W. Bush's veto of federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research -- a move scientists say will cripple research into the treatment of diseases ranging from Alzheimer's to diabetes.

Most Republican state legislators supported a Right-to-Life-sponsored measure that banned embryonic stem-cell research in Michigan -- and threatens to strangle the state's nascent biotech industry in its crib.

Abundant polling data suggest the Bush veto and the state research ban are both wildly unpopular with Michigan voters, and Democrats hoping to recapture legislative majorities in Lansing and Washington are hitting the issue hard.

Monday night, at a candidate forum sponsored by the Jewish Community Council, I watched three Oakland County Republicans squirm as a crowd of 100 or so voters questioned them about their opposition to stem-cell research.

U.S. Rep Joe Knollenberg, R-Bloomfield Township, is being challenged by Nancy Skinner, a Democrat who has criticized Knollenberg's support for the Bush administration's stem-cell position. State Rep. David Law, R-Commerce Township, another stem-cell prohibitionist, is being challenged by Democrat Lisa Brown, who favors expanded embryonic research.

Asked to explain their positions, Law, Knollenberg-surrogate Bryce Sandler and GOP state Senate candidate John Pappageorge all said they favored research using adult stem cells that can be harvested without destroying embryos.

A year ago, that answer might have bought the trio some political cover. But as public understanding of the stem-cell controversy grows more sophisticated, more and more voters recognize adult stem-cell research as a red herring that offers far less therapeutic promise than its embryonic counterpart.

At Monday's forum, nearly every mention of adult research brought hisses and snickers of derision.

The Democrats' most effective cheerleader for expanded embryonic stem-cell research may be Andy Levin, who is challenging Pappageorge for the seat being vacated by term-limited state Sen. Shirley Johnson, R-Royal Oak.

Levin, a cancer survivor whose two young sons have Crohn's disease, is understandably passionate on the subject of stem-cell technology's potential to cure chronic illness.

"What could be more pro-life than to take embryos that are going to be destroyed in any event and use them for a life-giving purpose?" Levin asked at Monday night's forum.

It's a question a lot of Michigan voters are asking -- and right now, the only response most Republican candidates can muster is to change the subject.

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