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Could Presidential Race Help Stem-Cell Question?

The fact that all three presidential candidates are pro-embryonic stem-cell research should boost the chances of a ballot initiative here in November, supporters say. Even Ed **RIVET**, legislative director for Michigan Right to Life (RTL), acknowledges that "could play a factor."

Still, Rivet said he's optimistic that if Republican John **McCAIN** is elected president, pro-lifers will sway him to see the issue their way.

"There's a lot of evidence to suggest that Sen. McCain will be under a great deal of influence to reconsider his position," Rivet told *MIRS* today.

But Rick **JOHNSON**, a former Republican House Speaker and long-time McCain supporter, thinks the presidential candidates' positions show that "it's not a Democratic or Republican issue." He's an original board member on the Stem Cell Research Ballot Question Committee.

The stem-cell ballot initiative is quietly humming along, exceeding signature-gathering goals, Johnson said today. The proposed constitutional amendment would permit scientific use of excess embryos from fertility clinics with written permission of the donor.

"This touches everybody in Michigan," Johnson said. "Almost everybody knows someone who could benefit from this."

The bipartisan group, which includes Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM**, former Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Michigan head Dick **WHITMER**, University of Michigan Regent S. Martin **TAYLOR**, Sen. Gretchen **WHITMER** (D-East Lansing) and former U.S. Rep. Joe **SCHWARZ**, has until July 7 to collect 380,126 signatures.

So far, the effort to legalize medical marijuana is the only initiative on the ballot, although there are several others in the works, including the Fair Tax, part-time Legislature and universal health care.

As of the end of last year, the stem-cell committee raised \$90,000 and had \$74,000 left in the bank, according to Secretary of State reports.

Michigan has one of the most-restrictive embryonic stem-cell bans in the country, joining North Dakota, South Dakota, Arkansas, and Louisiana in going beyond federal law. The Democratic-led House in December passed reform legislation ([HB 4816](#) and [HB 4163](#)), but the Senate sent it to the Senate Government Operations and Reform, where bills go to die.

It's unclear if legislators will get involved in the ballot proposal, but some of the vocal right-to-life

members are expected to. The Michigan Catholic Conference and Michigan RTL, among other groups, oppose the measure.

RTL is pushing back against the petition gatherers, putting out a release today noting their presence at "a college or university campus or at the farmer's market."

Rivet said RTL and other groups haven't started a ballot counter-campaign yet, saying they're in "wait and see mode" as the pro-stem-cell group gathers signatures. He said that there's "some indication they're moving forward" thanks to paid signature-gatherers.

In January, RTL put \$200,000 into what Rivet calls "consumer education" ads that weren't against the initiative (since it's not yet on the ballot), just against embryonic stem-cell research.

That prompted some concern amongst those who support the initiative that RTL was defining the issue.