

Missouri Voters Narrowly Approve Stem Cell Ballot Measure

Strong support in urban areas of a state constitutional amendment protecting stem cell research offset widespread opposition in rural counties as the measure narrowly passed with just over 51 percent of the vote.

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ST. LOUIS (AP) - Strong support in urban areas of a state constitutional amendment protecting stem cell research offset widespread opposition in rural counties as the measure narrowly passed with just over 51 percent of the vote.

Preliminary results showed the amendment winning support from 51.1 percent of the electorate with 98 percent of precincts reporting, a margin of about 46,800 votes.

While majorities of voters in 90 of the state's 114 counties rejected the measure, 13 counties and the city of St. Louis had enough votes to push the amendment over the top.

Heavy support in St. Louis, Kansas City and those two cities' suburbs proved critical to the ballot measure's success.

In the city of St. Louis, amendment supporters outnumbered opponents by about 31,000. In St. Louis County, the margin of victory was 55,000.

And in Jackson County, which encompasses much of Kansas City, the margin of victory nearly reached 48,000, with 99.2 percent of precincts reporting results.

In St. Louis, stem cell supporters in the black community mobilized 10 vans and a recreational vehicle to transport voters to the polls and encourage residents to vote, organizers said.

"Stem cell research is important to the state of Missouri as a whole, but in particular to the African-American community," said the Rev. B.T. Rice, pastor of New Horizons Christian Church in St. Louis.

Rice noted that illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease - two of the many ailments supporters suggest might benefit from the still-experimental research technique - disproportionately affect blacks.

The amendment, known as the Missouri Stem Cell Research and Cures Initiative, guarantees that any federally allowed stem cell research and treatments can occur in Missouri, including research using human embryos.

Its significance is largely symbolic: Embryonic stem cell research is already occurring in Missouri, although on a limited basis. Supporters cited several unsuccessful attempts by some state lawmakers to criminalize the procedure as impetus for the measure.

And while jubilant supporters celebrated their victory early Wednesday at a Washington University conference center in St. Louis, they also predicted that the statewide vote won't be the last word on the disputed research technique.

"Now we will have different battles to fight in the Legislature," said Donn Rubin, chairman of the Missouri Coalition for Lifesaving Cures, a group of university and business leaders, scientists and patient advocates who supported the amendment.

Jaci Winship, executive director of Missourians Against Human Cloning, said early Wednesday that the group was still assessing its options. Shortly after 1 a.m. CST, amendment opponents announced they would reconvene later Wednesday morning after more vote totals become known.

The ballot measure was the only one nationally in Tuesday's election to directly address the disputed research technique. The victory in Missouri could have implications far beyond the Show-Me State.

Stem cell supporters in Florida, Georgia and Kentucky were gearing up for similar ballot measures in the 2008 elections, depending upon the outcome in Missouri. Elsewhere, stem cell research emerged as a contentious campaign topic in the Wisconsin, Michigan, California, Maryland and Connecticut gubernatorial races.

While supporters portrayed the ballot measure as nonpartisan throughout the yearlong campaign, many backers monitoring election returns at Washington University simultaneously cheered on nationwide gains by Democrats. That includes a victory by Democratic State Auditor Claire McCaskill, who unseated incumbent Republican U.S. Sen. Jim Talent.

Though the technique is unproven, advocates of embryonic stem cell research hope it will eventually generate treatment and cures for spinal cord injuries, diabetes, Alzheimer's and a host of other diseases.

The five-page amendment bans human cloning, but implicitly allows a technique referred to by stem cell scientists as therapeutic cloning.

Also known as somatic cell nuclear transfer, the technique involves replacing the nucleus of an unfertilized human egg with the nucleus from a skin or nerve cell. The altered egg then is stimulated to grow in a lab dish, with researchers removing the resulting stem cells - and sacrificing the donor embryo in the process.

Outspent by nearly \$27 million in one of Missouri's costliest political campaigns on record, amendment opponents relied upon a grass-roots effort led by appeals from the pulpit and anti-abortion activists.

Their message: Despite the vast promise of embryonic stem cell research, the destruction of a human embryo, like abortion, is an assault on a human life that begins at conception.

Opponents also cited what they called deceptive ballot language that purported to ban human cloning while actually allow another form of cloning - namely SCNT. They also raised questions about the methods that could be used to obtain donor eggs through payments to poor and vulnerable women.

Although the connection between Democratic supporters and amendment backers was visible Tuesday night at Washington University, the amendment also won the support of prominent Republicans such as Gov. Matt Blunt and former U.S. Sen. John Danforth.

Besides drawing a distinction between reproductive and therapeutic cloning, the two political leaders cited the considerable economic benefits Missouri might reap as a state supportive of cutting-edge research.

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