

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB96507999115094294>

# GOP Avoids Abortion for Now, But Science Is Stirring the Debate

*By Bob Davis* Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

*Aug. 1, 2000 12:01 am ET*

PHILADELPHIA -- Republicans may have called a truce in their civil war over abortion, but don't expect it to hold. Scientific advances are reshaping abortion politics.

Consider Sen. Gordon Smith. The National Right to Life Committee says the Oregon Republican voted the right way on abortion every time last year. But when an Oregon antiabortion activist asked him a few weeks ago to defend a prohibition on extracting stem cells from human embryos because the procedure kills the embryos, he declined. Someday, he told her, researchers might be able to turn such cells into neurons that would relieve the Parkinson's disease that has ravaged his family.

"I've had many people who have died slowly," he told the activist. "Part of my pro-life ethic is to make life better for the living."



**Gordon Smith**

The debate over abortion has roiled Republican conventions since the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973. This year, George W. Bush persuaded delegates to bury the issue by leaving unchanged the antiabortion language included in previous party platforms. The less time taken up with the abortion question, he and other Republican leaders felt, the better. The platform committee voted down all proposals by abortion-rights advocates, including one to simply "welcome people on all sides of this complex issue." Mr. Bush, says Maryland delegate Ellen Sauerbrey, "was trying to avoid abortion becoming the center of the campaign."

Even if he succeeds, new fronts are opening in the debate. Genetic technology is deepening ethical dilemmas and opening fissures within the antiabortion movement,

and even within the abortion-rights side.

Over the next few years, for instance, prenatal tests will be developed that can detect whether fetuses are prone to develop breast cancer and other maladies when they become adults. Unlike the familiar Down's syndrome test, which gives a yes or no answer, the new tests will reveal only the odds for developing a condition, and one that wouldn't arrive for years. While the new tests won't change anything for those dead-set against abortion, they could complicate the issue for others.

## **Stem Cells**

There is also a gathering controversy over so-called therapeutic cloning. Scientists would clone an embryo of a patient, which would essentially be used for spare parts or to test new treatments, and be destroyed in the process. A British biomedical advisory group is expected to recommend that the United Kingdom government endorse work on the technology.

In the U.S., the next big abortion fight is likely to focus on the discovery in late 1998 that stem cells -- precursor cells that can develop into brain, blood and any other tissue -- can be harvested from human embryos stored at fertility clinics. Since the harvesting kills the embryo, the technology raises in a new way the intimate question at the heart of the abortion debate: When, if ever, is it acceptable to sacrifice the unborn?

The presidential candidates line up in predictable ways. Gov. Bush, an abortion foe, opposes the new technology. Vice President Gore, an abortion-rights advocate, supports it. But some others in the antiabortion and abortion-rights camps are struggling with the issue and re-examining their views.

Using stem cells, scientists are working to develop replacements for tissue damaged in Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's, diabetes and other conditions. The cells also might be useful following chemotherapy for cancer. Thus, the abortion debate doesn't involve just a woman and her embryo or fetus. This new technology brings in another party: a disease-sufferer who might benefit from tissue collected from embryos or fetuses.

## **Support for Research**

Citing the promise of the new technology, Sen. Smith and a few other antiabortion Republicans whose families have been battered by disease have declined to support a

blanket opposition to stem-cell research with embryos. They include Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, whose daughter has diabetes, Sen. Connie Mack of Florida, whose family is riddled with cancer, and Rep. Duke Cunningham of California, a prostate-cancer survivor. Some other antiabortion Republicans are privately offering their backing for embryo research, as well.

"There's a weakening on the part of pro-family groups on this issue," agrees conservative activist Paul Weyrich.

Opponents of embryo research see it as an especially pernicious assault on life and sometimes cast their foes as sellouts. "Where are you ethically when you have an emotional hurt [because of disease] and you abandon your ethics?" asks Rep. Tom Coburn, an Oklahoma Republican, who is also a family doctor. Kansas Republican Sen. Sam Brownback says that if the government endorses research that destroys embryos, it will be categorizing a form of human life as "property" that can be used guilt-free for experimentation. The Republican platform applauds GOP lawmakers "for the steps they have taken for the protection of human embryos" but doesn't mention the stem-cell controversy.

Meanwhile, a staunch supporter of abortion rights, the United Methodist Church, has come out against stem-cell research. "Human embryo research is a big step toward making human life a commodity," says Jaydee Hanson, senior staffer on the church's bioethics task force.

Sen. Smith's struggle to find his way in this scrambled abortion debate shows the splits that are beginning to develop among Republicans. The 48-year-old Mr. Smith is a devout Mormon who served two years as a missionary in New Zealand. He keeps an ornate Bible by his desk and consults it regularly. Noting that two basic Mormon tenets are free choice and the sanctity of life, he says that "there's no issue that brings these two principles in conflict as much as abortion."

Abortion politics have played a central role in Mr. Smith's career. He rose to prominence in Oregon by pushing through the state Senate a law requiring minors to get parental consent for abortions. In his first U.S. Senate bid in early 1996 (when Bob Packwood resigned), Mr. Smith allied himself with the right wing, attacked abortion and gay rights, and lost. Later that year, he ran for Oregon's other Senate seat, soft-pedaled abortion -- and won.

He arrived in Washington with a zealot's reputation. But he was always a more complicated political figure, particularly on abortion.

As a child, Mr. Smith had seen his mother, who had already given birth to seven children, grow resentful over not having a legal option for ending an especially difficult pregnancy. "She felt devalued," he recalls.

He is also haunted by the specter of Parkinson's disease. It took the lives of his grandmother and a cousin, Rep. Morris Udall, and some other Udall family members. A favorite uncle is now incapacitated with it. Sen. Smith sees research on embryos as a source of hope for Parkinson's patients. But he worries about whether he is being true to his antiabortion views. "There's a human life, a child of God at stake," he says.

The stem-cell debate mirrors one on research involving fetal tissue. The Bush administration imposed a ban on fetal research, which Bill Clinton lifted when he took office. Since then, researchers have tried implanting fetal tissue in the brains of Parkinson's sufferers, hoping to ease a deficiency of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Thus far, younger patients have benefited somewhat, but not people over 60.

A more promising idea arrived in late 1998. In a feat that Science magazine called the breakthrough of the year, two scientific teams harvested stem cells from embryos (from fertility clinics) and aborted fetuses, and coaxed the cells to grow in the laboratory. Parkinson's researchers believed that if they injected stem cells into patients, the highly flexible precursor cells might grow into dopamine-producing neurons. Ron McKay, a National Institutes of Health researcher, has done this with mice and alleviated Parkinson's-like tremors.

But 1996 legislation, which has been renewed annually, bars federal funding for research that destroys embryos, so Dr. McKay can't try his technique in humans. To him, "It's a pity to take the vast government research effort and prevent it from being applied to this useful technology."

Now, the NIH has plotted a way around the restriction. The agency has proposed new rules allowing it to give grants to researchers who get their stem cells from other, non-federally funded scientists. Abortion foes, considering this hairsplitting, have organized letter-writing campaigns that have deluged the NIH with complaints. But the agency is expected to adopt the rules this summer.

At the same time, Republican Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa are pushing a bill to lift the ban on federal funding of embryo research. It might come to a vote in September.

## A Constituent Calls

On a recent day, this brewing battle brings Gayle Atteberry, executive director of the Oregon Right to Life Committee, to Sen. Smith's office. A longtime friend of Mr. Smith, she begins to draw a diagram for him of how an impregnated egg develops into an embryo. She stops suddenly, looks him in the eye and says: "A fertilized egg that has divided is being snatched away. It's dead."

"Is there no room in your view" for another opinion, the senator asks.

How could there be, she replies. She reads a verse from Psalm 139, where the psalmist says of God, "Your eyes saw my unformed body." Even when a human is an "unformed substance," she says, it is divinely blessed.

Sen. Smith, a soft-spoken man who shuns confrontation, tries to explain his own theology, influenced by a Mormon Church elder who is a heart surgeon. The senator believes the soul infuses a fetus around the time its blood starts circulating, or about six weeks after conception. His interpretation would allow scientists to destroy embryos without violating religious injunctions. "When He put the spirit in the body is the critical question for me," Sen. Smith says. "I have never thought of cells frozen in a refrigerator as human life. If it isn't life, it isn't killing."

"What else is it?" Ms. Atteberry asks.

"If I cut my finger, I'm not ending life."

"But that finger can't develop into a human life," she replies.

Nonplused, she unwraps a gift she has brought the senator: Dr. Seuss's "Horton Hears a Who." She quietly repeats the refrain, "A person's a person, no matter how small." In the same way, she says, even tiny embryos deserve protection. The book is a favorite of his, too, he tells her, and leaves it at that.

Ms. Atteberry tries a more pragmatic approach. Scientists have discovered stem cells in adults, too, she says. Why not focus research on those, rather than ones found in embryos? He listens but is noncommittal. After she leaves, he says he wants to move forward on stem cells no matter what their origin, and plans to fight for the Specter/Harkin bill. Scientists worry that stem cells from adults won't be as adaptable and long-lived as those taken from embryos. "We need to do what works," he says.

The stance may cost him politically among antiabortion conservatives, but gain him support among the state's more-numerous moderates. "Smith doesn't have solid

principles," says Lon Mabon, chairman of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, a conservative group that backed his first Senate run and opposed his second. But Mr. Mabon acknowledges that "a lot of the pro-life community in Oregon is moving to where Sen. Smith is."

## Leading the Opposition

Sen. Smith's main foe in the stem-cell debate is Sen. Brownback of Kansas. An earnest Methodist, the Kansan says he prayed before testifying in April at a hearing chaired by Sen. Specter. "At the very center of the debate," he testified, is the question: "Is the young human a person or property?"

Two months later, he made a similar plea to a weekly meeting of Senate Republicans. The government should focus on adult-stem-cell research, he told them, and let embryos alone. After he was done, participants say, Sen. Mack of Florida replied: "I have many of the beliefs of Sam, but the door should be left open to research," including that involving embryos. Sen. Mack didn't mention that he, his wife and his daughter are cancer survivors, but Sen. Smith says other lawmakers knew of Sen. Mack's struggles with the disease.

Thus far, the stem-cell supporters have been quietly effective. Rep. Jay Dickey, an Arkansas Republican who sponsored the ban on embryo-destroying research, hasn't taken action on his threat to broaden it to halt NIH's rule-making. His aides say he has decided to rely on the courts to upset the new NIH rules. But some conservative activists and other congressional aides say Mr. Dickey doesn't have the votes.

Medical-research lobbyists who want the ban lifted are keeping their distance from abortion-rights groups, to avoid scaring off pro-life Republicans. Instead, they recruit patients as advocates for their position. Sen. Smith had a visit two weeks ago from one such advocate, Joan Samuelson of the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research. Sitting on one of her hands to make a tremor from Parkinson's less noticeable, she expressed her frustration that the NIH wasn't making more progress against the disease.

The senator promised to do what he could, mindful of the toll that Parkinson's is currently taking on a 79-year-old uncle of his, Addison Udall. Mr. Udall is so ill he can no longer walk or talk. Yet in an indication of how difficult the issue is, Mr. Udall's wife, Ada, says that she has "mixed emotions" about stem-cell research, even though that could combat the disease ravaging her husband. "That fertilized embryo could become a person," she says.

Write to Bob Davis at [bob.davis@wsj.com](mailto:bob.davis@wsj.com)