

ELECTION 2004: States address stem cells, gay marriage

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Body

San Diego --- California voters resoundingly approved a measure to spend \$3 billion in public money for embryonic **stem cell** research, opening the door for the most aggressive push yet into the controversial science.

The California proposition was one of dozens of ballot items nationwide that forced voters Tuesday to consider their morality and their money in an **election** in which voters' values played a large role.

Eleven **states**, stretching from Georgia to Oregon, overwhelmingly approved bans on **gay marriage**, prompting some advocates of same-sex **marriages** to announce Wednesday that they'll sue to overturn the new laws.

Voters in six **states** decided how they will regulate gambling, allowing a lottery and slot machines at horse tracks in Oklahoma and limiting casino expansion in Nebraska and California.

Cox Washington Bureau

Other **states** made major decisions on marijuana. Alaska voters snuffed out a proposal that would have decriminalized use of the drug, while Montana approved its use for medicinal purposes.

And in Arizona, a new measure --- unique in the United **States** --- would require proof of citizenship for voter registration and proof of immigration status to receive certain government services.

Supporters said it would curtail fraud in the **state** where the most illegal immigrants enter the country from Mexico; Arizona spends millions of dollars annually on food stamps, welfare and other social services for illegal immigrants.

"People understand at a gut level that we've got a problem with illegal immigration and we've got to **address** it," said Randy Pullen, a leading supporter of Proposition 200.

Voters in 34 **states** were asked to consider 162 ballot propositions on **Election** Day, according to the Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California.

While the issue of **gay marriage** was the most popular **state** ballot topic nationwide, the California **stem cell** initiative was one of the most closely watched.

With its passage, California will sell \$3 billion in bonds to pay for research on embryonic **stem cells** at universities throughout the **state**.

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The measure puts California on the forefront of stem cell research, in part because it circumvents limits on public funding by the Bush administration that are expected to remain in place with the president's re-election.

Bush and other opponents of public funding say they're ethically opposed to destroying days-old embryos --- even if most are abandoned at fertility clinics and eventually destroyed anyway --- to get at the cells that are the basis of life.

Proponents of embryonic stem cell research say it paves the way for potential cures for diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the mission Californians accepted today is a critical first step in changing the face of human suffering forever," businessman Robert Klein, who spearheaded the measure's passage, said in a statement.

California voters also apparently agreed with supporters who claim the measure could foster a biotech industry boom akin to the creation of Silicon Valley in a state that's still struggling fiscally.

The \$3 billion is expected to attract academics and biotech companies from around the globe to California --- potentially at the expense of other current and aspiring biotech hubs in Georgia, Florida, Texas and North Carolina.

One of the biggest boosts for the stem cell measure came just a few weeks ago, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his support.

California voters also sided with the Republican governor on 10 other ballot initiatives, strengthening the ex-actor's political power and boosting his already high popularity level.

"The people have flexed their muscles again," Schwarzenegger said Wednesday. "I'm so excited today --- I'm in heaven."

Voters also sided with Schwarzenegger on a measure that limits employer health care coverage requirements, another that keeps in place California's "three strikes" conviction law and others that limit gambling operations.

Elsewhere, in other ballot initiatives:

- * South Carolinians voted to quit requiring bars and restaurants to serve liquor only in by-the-drink mini-bottles.
- * Colorado voters rejected a measure that would have changed that state's winner-take-all system in presidential elections and distribute the state's nine electoral votes based on the popular vote instead.
- * In Alaska and Maine, voters rejected measures that would have banned using bait to hunt for bears.
- * Maine and South Dakota voters both declined opportunities to lower taxes. South Dakotans defeated a bid to scrap the sales tax on groceries, while a measure to cap property taxes lost in Maine after opponents said it would force layoffs of teachers and firefighters.
- * It was a tough day for cigarette smokers. Columbus, Ohio, banned smoking in public places, while taxes on a pack of cigarettes were boosted in Colorado, Montana and Oklahoma. The biggest increase was in Montana, where the tax went from 70 cents to \$1.70 a pack.

--- The Associated Press contributed to this article.

Graphic

Photo: Robert Klein, who led the effort to provide state funding for stem cell research in California, celebrates Tuesday in Los Angeles with Tessa Wick (left) and her mother, Lucy Fisher. / CHRIS CARLSON / Associated Press

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