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What does the county's vote on stem cell research mean?

The results of the recent election ought to give pause to all those who think they understand the mind of Livingston County voters.

Livingston is “red state” territory, right? Republican, conservative, Bush country ... and definitely right-to-life. So conservative is Livingston County that candidates running for county commissioner, school board, even library board have put their right-to-life stance on their literature, even though none of those positions have a thing to do with the abortion issue. Right-to-life is the litmus test for holding office in Livingston County.

And in the Daily Press & Argus' candidate forums this year, for both the primary and general election, every Republican participating indicated they would oppose Proposal 2, the ballot question in last Tuesday's election that will loosen restrictions on stem cell research. They said they would do so precisely because of their right-to-life stance on abortion.

So how come Livingston County actually voted to approve Proposal 2? And how come Livingston County voters actually approved the amendment by a wider margin than the state as a whole?

That's right — statewide, voters approved Proposal 2 with 52.6 percent of the vote. In Livingston County, 53.1 percent said yes to Proposal 2.

What does that mean? We don't think for one minute it means there has been any kind of shift in Livingston County's fundamental feeling on abortion. If a question to overturn *Roe v. Wade* were on the ballot here tomorrow, it would likely pass.

Yet apparently a substantial segment of voters in Livingston County sees a difference, makes a distinction, between using abortion as a form of birth control and conducting medical research — which ultimately will lead to cures for diseases and disabilities — from embryos discarded from in-vitro fertilization.

These voters appear to be willing to look past the rhetoric of one issue that they have already taken a stand on and think through a fresh issue to a new conclusion. They seem unwilling to let pat stances and political sloganeering stand in the way of reasonable scientific progress.

Politicians could have done this. The folks who populate the seats in the state House and Senate could have applied this fresh thinking themselves to a fresh issue. Then we would not have needed to address this issue at the ballot box.

The result might be better public policy. Opponents of Proposal 2 claimed there were flaws in the plan in the way it was worded to protect stem cell research from regulation at the state level. All that could have been addressed in the Legislature, had the Legislature been willing to give stem cell research reasonable consideration in the first place. But frankly, lawmakers didn't do their job.

That being said, we also recognize how often politicians are able to capitalize on the reasonably held positions of their opponents by restating them and mischaracterizing.

Is it reasonable to believe that a vote allowing for reasonable levels of stem cell research might be recast by an opponent to sound absolutely reprehensible? Sure.

As long as voters let politicians get away with that kind of thing, they'll send to the Capitol representatives who are afraid to think, compromise or be reasonably bipartisan.

The heavy lifting — when it comes to thinking through the tough, challenging new issues like stem cell research — will fall back on the voters themselves.

For better, and for worse, we really do get the government we deserve.