

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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“I have always believed that hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting.”

– Barack Obama; Election Night Speech; November 7, 2012

Today’s column is the last in a series about events which occurred the week of November 4.

Four weeks ago, I noted that, as of October’s sales tax report, Teton County’s restaurants now generate more revenue than our lodging industry. To put that in perspective, in the fall of 2008, lodging sales were twice those of restaurants. (Hot-off-the-press update: The trend accelerates. During the last 12 months, restaurant sales totaled \$193 million, versus \$184 million for ; lodging.)

Two weeks ago, I wrote about the lodging tax board’s intriguing decision to develop and run a conservation-themed annual event for October. Today, my focus is on the November 6 election, in particular four conclusions I drew from the results.

1. Data matter, and the scientific method works

President Obama is right when he talks about the importance of hope. There is a difference, however, between hope and fantasy. Hope is the feeling you’ll win the lottery; fantasy is planning your financial future around that feeling.

The stunned reaction of so many Republicans to the election results told me two things. First, the Republicans’ loathing of the President tipped their judgment from hope to fantasy. Second, the Republicans’ long-term success finally came back to bite them.

A fundamental human quality is that success usually leads us not just to repeat the same patterns, but repeat them in a more extreme fashion. In the GOP’s case, for nearly 20 years a strategy of blasting Democrats and pounding home a few basic themes (e.g. tax cuts are good; immigrants are bad; and ideology trumps science) allowed them to not just shape, but usually own, the national political landscape.

That success, however, led to an increasing insistence on ideological purity, which among other things led the party to basically disavow any science at odds with its philosophies. Whether natural or social science, the GOP has increasingly not just ignored facts, but reflexively condemned any which challenge its orthodoxy. That strategy yielded wonderful short-term political benefits, but ultimately fell victim to a fundamental truism: no matter how shrill the denial, facts ultimately triumph. In 2012, their success in ignoring reality led party grandees to believe that inconvenient facts such as public opinion data didn’t matter. They did and they do, but it’s an open question whether the GOP is ready to embrace this lesson.

2. Schechter’s maxim holds

Schechter’s maxim, abridged: Economies change faster than perceptions; perceptions change faster than politics.

Schechter’s maxim, unabridged:

- i. Scientific knowledge changes faster than technologies;
- ii. Technologies change faster than economies;
- iii. Economies change faster than perceptions;

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- iv. Perceptions change faster than politics;
- v. Politics change faster than government;
- vi. Government changes faster than laws;
- vii. Laws change faster than jurisprudence.

As I see it, the maxim explains why the Republicans find themselves on the wrong side of the facts-versus-ideology dilemma.

On election night, Fox bloviator Bill O'Reilly lamented that "Its not a traditional America anymore." He went on to observe that, 20 years ago, an "establishment candidate" like Mitt Romney would have handily won.

What happened? Simply put, while the world has changed rapidly and fundamentally, conservatives' perceptions have not. Viewed through the prism of Schechter's maxim, the battle between facts and ideology is being played out in the gap between points i. and v. This is a large and growing gap, and In this past election, the GOP couldn't bridge it.

To illustrate just how wide the gap is, let's use patents issued by the U.S. Patent Office as a proxy for the pace of change. And let's go back 20 years, to when Mr. O'Reilly feels Gov. Romney would have won.

Through the end of 1991, the US Patent Office had issued a total of five million patents. During the next 20 years, it issued an additional three million. To put that in perspective, it took 57 years for the Patent Office to go from issuing two million to five million patents. Do the math and, for this generation, change is occurring three times faster than it did for previous generations.

Hence the problem. When the pace of change is accelerating that rapidly, how do hide-bound institutions such as government and political parties keep up? The answer is "Not well." And ignoring facts certainly isn't helping the GOP in this effort, for the same scientific method that is producing the technology driving our economy – something the GOP embraces – also tells us things like humans are warming the planet – something the GOP derides. The party can't have it both ways without creating tremendous internal schisms, and the election laid those schisms bare.

Then add in how technological changes are changing perceptions and values, and you have a recipe for electoral disaster.

3. Wyoming is America's most conservative state

In 2000, 68 percent of Wyoming voters plumped for George W. Bush , the highest percentage in the land. In 2004, 2008, and 2012, we ranked second in the percentage of voters favoring the Republican candidate.

This got me wondering how Wyoming's politics compare to other states. To determine this, for every state I gathered four types of data:

- i. Percentage of votes for the Republican presidential candidate in 2000 - 2012
- ii. Percentage of counties voting for the Republican presidential candidate in 2000-2012
- iii. Percentage of Republicans in the state's legislature in 2012
- iv. Percentage of Republicans holding statewide office (both state and federal)

Multiplying these percentages together gave me a "Political Leanings Index." As Table 1 shows (below), using this methodology, Wyoming ranks as the most conservative state in the nation, followed by Idaho, Utah and, in a close fourth, Nebraska.

At the other end of the spectrum, Hawaii is as solidly Democratic as Wyoming is Republican, with Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut rounding out the top four. If you count independent Bernie Sanders as a Democrat, then Vermont squeaks by Connecticut into fourth place.

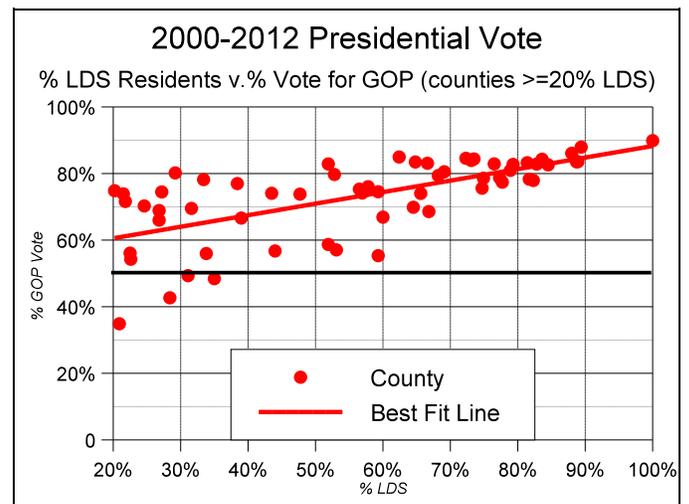
These data confirm what most observers know: Wyoming is a deeply conservative state. Simply put, Wyoming's Republican hegemony is unequalled.

In that light, it has been interesting to see the party heading down the same ideological purity road that has afflicted the national Republican party over the past few elections. First in the 2010 Gubernatorial race, and again in the 2012 Congressional race, the biggest challenge facing Governor Mead and Congresswoman Lummis came not from the Democratic candidate, but from opponents trying to outflank them on the right. We're also starting to see this dynamic in Teton County, where Representative Petroff faced a strong challenge in the primary. Going forward, it's not clear how Wyoming's Republicans resolve this ideology-versus-facts conflict. More critically, it's not clear how that conflict will affect legislation affecting all Wyomingites.

4. Whether causation or correlation, America's three most conservative states are those with the highest percentage of LDS members

In 2010, the wild and crazy number crunchers of the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies examined religiosity in every county in America. Among their findings was that in three states, at least 10 percent of residents are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Utah (68 percent); Idaho (26 percent); and Wyoming (11 percent). Coincidentally, these same three states rank as the nation's most politically conservative.

Further breaking down the numbers, in 61 American counties at least 20 percent of the residents are LDS members. For each of these counties, I compared the percentage of LDS members to the percentage of the vote received by the Republican candidate for president in the four elections between 2000-2012. As Graph 1 shows, in 57 of these 61 counties, the GOP candidate received at least 50 percent of the vote. Further, of the four counties in which the average vote fell below 50 percent, two have a majority of non-white residents (Apache AZ and Conejos CO) and two are Utah's bastions of hedonism (and even in Moab and Park City, the GOP candidate averages nearly 50 percent).



Graph 1

Whether it's coincidence or something more, there's a close correlation between a strong LDS presence and conservative politics. If demographics is political destiny, this is conservative bent is something for political leaders to keep in mind in any community where the LDS church – one of the world's fastest-growing religions – has a strong presence.

Mitt Romney may have lost, but his candidacy is a clear indicator of the increasing LDS influence in the Republican party. As that influence grows, both the party and the church will have to wrestle with the dilemma posed when facts conflict with their core ideology. How quickly and successfully that dilemma is addressed will greatly influence how soon the Republican party can return to power, and how comfortably the LDS church integrates into a rapidly-changing country.

Table 1
States' Political Leanings

Most Republican						
Rank	State	I. % of State Voting for GOP Pres. Candidate (2000-2012)	II. % of Counties Voting for GOP Pres. Candidate (2012)	III. % of Legislators Who are GOP (2012)	IV. % of Statewide Elected Officials who are GOP (2012)	Total (Columns I x II x III x IV)
1	WY	67.5%	96%	84%	100%	54.5%
2	ID	65.2%	96%	81%	100%	50.7%
3	UT	68.3%	97%	77%	80%	46.9%
4	NE	61.2%	98%	83%	92%	44.8%
5	OK	64.7%	97%	68%	93%	39.4%
Most Democratic						
Rank	State	I. % of State Voting for Democratic Pres. Candidate (2000-2012)	II. % of Counties Voting for Dem. Pres. Candidate (2012)	III. % of Legislators Who are Dem. (2012)	IV. % of Statewide Elected Officials who are Dem. (2012)	Total (Columns I x II x III x IV)
1	HI	63.5%	100%	88%	100%	55.9%
2	MA	61.1%	100%	82%	94%	46.7%
3	RI	61.6%	100%	82%	89%	45.1%
4	CT	56.7%	94%	65%	100%	34.4%
5	VT	60.8%	91%	70%	78%	30.2%