

**Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column**  
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The recent elections got me thinking about challenges facing the nation, state, and county.

I'm most sanguine when I think about local prospects. Given that all incumbents were returned to office, and given that local government works pretty well, we should continue to see progress made on major issues such as the Comp Plan. Then consider that the local economy will likely grow, albeit slowly, as a result of the national economic improving, especially for the higher-end folks who are our tourism demographic. Combine it all, and over the next year or two things should continue their gentle climb up from last spring's trough.

I'm most depressed when I think about national prospects. The nation is facing all sorts of problems, yet because of political cowardice on the part of the Democrats and breathtaking cynicism on the part of the Republicans, nothing will get done over the next two years.

Both of these outcomes are fairly certain. Far less certain is what will happen statewide.

No state is more thoroughly dominated by one political party than Wyoming. Not only will Republicans fill every federal and statewide office; they'll also have such total control over both houses of the Legislature that there won't be enough Democrats to serve on all committees.

In fact, things are so bad for Wyoming's Democrats that their recent gubernatorial nominee – Teton County's Leslie Petersen – drew more than 20 percent of the vote in only 9 of Wyoming's 23 counties. Most striking of all was the fact that, in five eastern Wyoming counties – Campbell, Converse, Crook, Niobrara, and Weston – Petersen was out-pollied by write-in candidate Taylor Haynes, who was running because he felt that neither Republican Matt Mead nor Libertarian Mike Wheeler was sufficiently conservative.

All this suggests that, as was the case after the 2000 Census, Teton County will once again get shafted in the upcoming re-districting. Between 1990 and 2000, Teton County was the fastest-growing county in Wyoming, and Lincoln and Sublette counties – i.e. those counties dependent on Teton County's economy – ranked just below us. Because of this, any reasonable re-districting plan would have resulted in Teton County being the main population center of 2 districts for the state senate and 4 for the state house.

Instead, due to political machinations by the Republican-controlled legislature and governor, we ended up with 1 senator and 2 representatives, while serving on the rump of one other district for both. Given that the legislature has become even more conservative (meaning even more likely to stick it to the liberals in Teton County), it seems inevitable that we'll get the short end of the gerrymander stick once again. The most probable outcome? The seats soon to be held by Keith Gingery, Ruth Ann Petroff, and Leland Christensen – Republicans all – will be consolidated within Teton County, while the seat held by Jim Roscoe (one of 10 Democrats in the Wyoming House) will disappear.

All of this will occur despite the fact that the Census will likely show that Teton, Sublette, and Lincoln counties have once again formed Wyoming's fastest-growing region.

As I say, to me this seems an inevitable consequence of the one-party rule that will take hold in Cheyenne starting in January. I don't know what I find sadder: the utter ineptness of Wyoming's Democrats, or the “power corrupts” potential tempting Wyoming's Republicans. Regardless, the simple fact is that Republicans will enjoy unfettered control over Wyoming's government for the next four years, and realistically for the next eight years, as no Governor in recent memory has been defeated for re-election. Given that reality, and given that the state's economy is reasonably healthy, the interesting question is how active or

passive this profoundly conservative group of public officials will choose to be.

For me, one interesting bellwether will be how Wyoming deals with the fact that we're becoming both younger and less well-educated than the nation as a whole.

Advances in technology mean the world is rapidly becoming a far more competitive place. As a result, the key to long-term economic success is education, for as the hollowing out of America's industrial core has shown, it's becoming ever-harder to get a good job without a college education.

Yet over the past few decades, higher education has ceased to be a major concern for Wyoming's residents. In 1980, a larger proportion of Wyoming residents held a bachelor's degree or higher than did residents of the nation as a whole. Since then, however, we've fallen back: As with auto factories in Detroit, agriculture and hydrocarbons have lured Wyoming residents who didn't want to pursue higher education.

In particular, in 1980, 17.2 percent of Wyoming residents aged 25 or older held a bachelor's degree or higher, ranking us 22<sup>nd</sup> among all states (the national average that year was 16.2 percent).

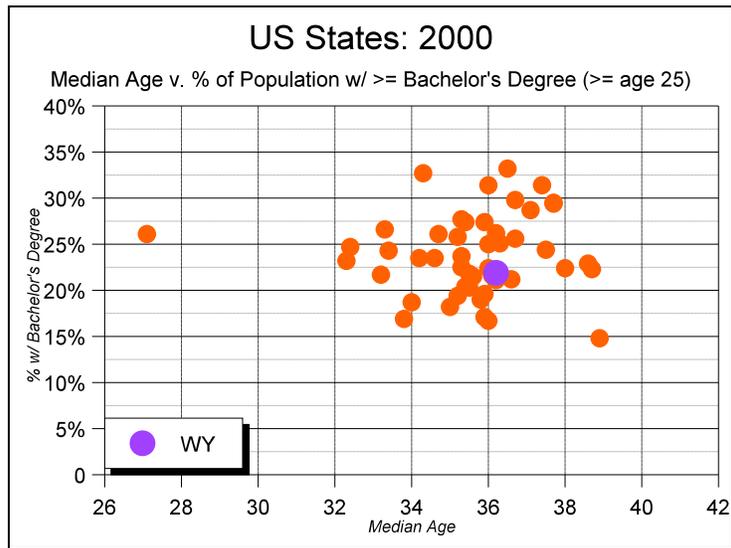
By 1990, 20.3 percent of American adults had bachelor's degrees, while Wyoming's came in at 18.8 percent, ranking us 28<sup>th</sup> among all states. By 2000, the US was at 24.4 percent, while Wyoming was at 21.9 percent, good for 34<sup>th</sup> place. (As a point of reference, in 2000 46 percent of all Teton County adults had a bachelor's degree or better, ranking us in the top 1 percent nationally).

This decline has continued over the past 8 years: in 2008, 27.7 percent of all American adults held a bachelor's degree or better, versus 23.6 percent of Wyoming's adults. This ranked us 40<sup>th</sup> among all states. As a result, where in 1980 our residents' education profile was similar to that in major industrial and technology states, today we look more like the states of the deep South.

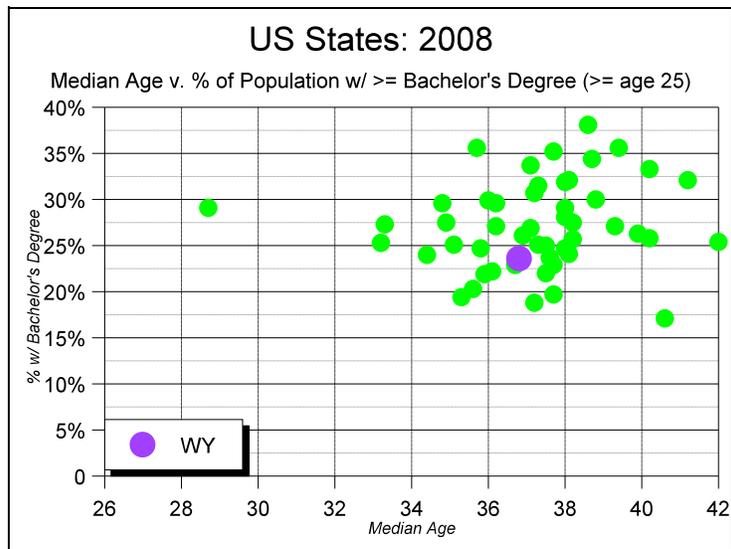
At the same time, we're also aging much more slowly than the rest of the nation: between 2000 and 2008, our median age barely budged, meaning we went from being the 17<sup>th</sup> oldest state to the 18<sup>th</sup> youngest. This, of course, is due to younger workers without college degrees coming into the state to take jobs in the hydrocarbon industries of mining, coal bed methane, gas field development, and the like. (Graphs 1-3).

The point of all this is that we're very much replicating the pattern Wyoming went through in the 1980s, when our young, relatively uneducated population was thriving with good jobs in the hydrocarbon industry. When that boom went bust, though, we were left in very bad shape, poorly equipped to handle a new economy. What makes the current trend more concerning is the rapid advances in technology: When the next bust strikes, Wyoming's under-educated population will leave the state in an even weaker position relative to the skills needed in a global economy.

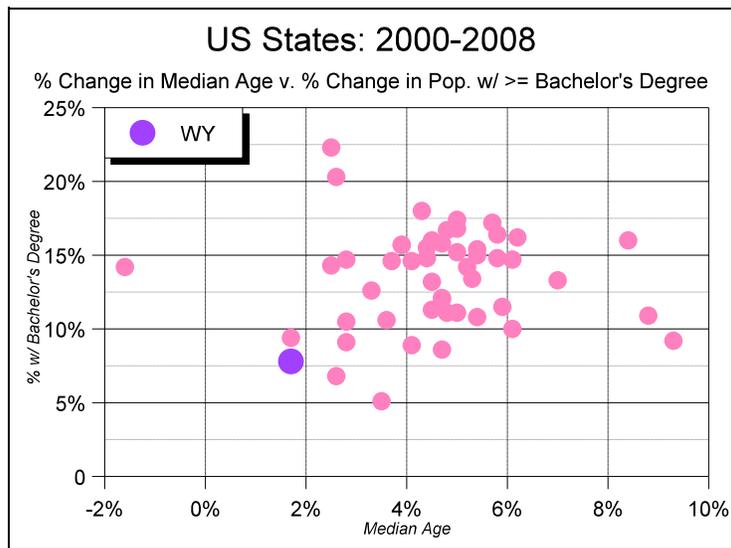
The opportunity at hand for Wyoming's new governor and legislature is to address this inevitable problem. Between Wyoming's current financial wealth and the Republicans' extraordinary political power, the state's new political regime can position the state extraordinarily well for the future. Alternatively, they can also sit back and let the fates dictate our future. It will be interesting to see what transpires.



*Graph 1*



*Graph 2*



*Graph 3*