

ALERT TOP STORY

For Wyoming Democrats, voting for Cheney is another chance to vote against Trump

Tanner Ewalt and his friends have a saying.

Victoria Eavis
Jul 7, 2022

"We all have to vote for Liz Cheney. I'm so sorry."

Ewalt is a 20-year-old University of Wyoming student from Casper majoring in political science. In the 2020 Democratic primary, he voted for ultra-left presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. Now, he and other staunch Democrats across Wyoming are changing their party registration to support Cheney -- who voted with former President Donald Trump 93% of the time during her tenure -- in next month's Republican primary.

Cheney remains deeply conservative, and her family name has served as a liberal boogeyman since her father was vice president. She's attracting growing Democratic support, however, not only for her vote to impeach Trump after the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, but also for her relentless criticism of the former president as a threat to democracy and the rule of law. That opposition has spurred the toughest reelection fight of her political career in the form of Trump-backed natural resources attorney Harriet Hageman.

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For many longtime Wyoming Democrats, the Aug. 16 primary will mark the first day they'll be registered as a Republican, in large part thanks to the ongoing battle between Cheney and Trump.

Although a notable number of Democrats are crossing over for Cheney, they likely won't win the race for her because of how few liberals there are in Wyoming. A Casper Star-Tribune poll conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Strategy found Hageman leads Cheney 52% to 30%. The survey of likely Republican primary voters included members of the GOP, but also Democrats and independents who plan to change their party affiliation to support Cheney.



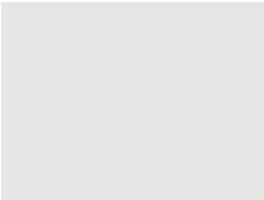
Former Wyoming Gov. Mike Sullivan, pictured Wednesday in Casper, is a Democrat, but he plans to change political parties and vote for Rep. Liz Cheney. Like many Democrats who are supporting Cheney, he says doing so is a matter of principles over politics.

Lauren Miller, Star-Tribune

The Democratic exodus is unprecedented in recent Wyoming history, even if it appears unlikely to alter the final result.

"In my time in Wyoming, there hasn't been any comparable situation," said Dr.

Jim King, a political science professor at the University of Wyoming since 1992. Former Democratic Gov. Mike Sullivan, who's lived in Wyoming for 80 years, said this is "a different sort of animal than [he's] ever seen before."



The poll results are in: Hageman holds commanding lead over Cheney

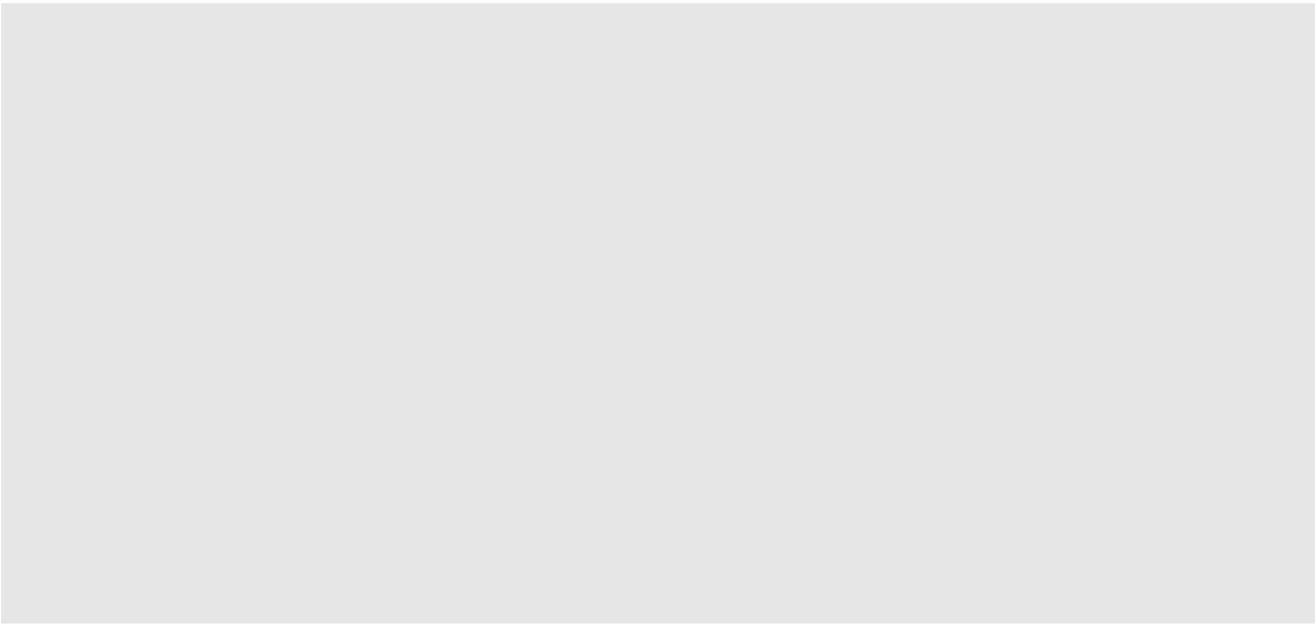
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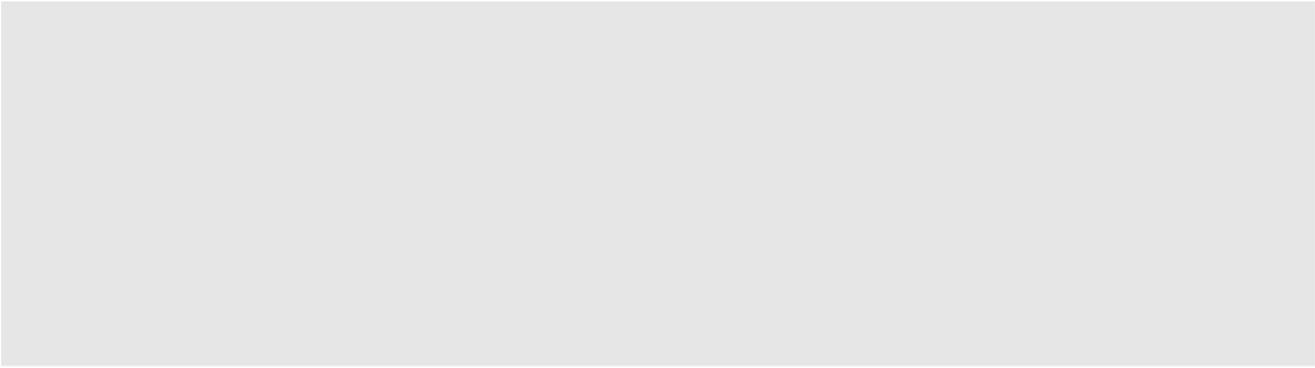
In previous Wyoming races, "there were much more of shades of gray than black and white," King added. "And I think the question of Trump has kind of changed the Republican primary this year into a discussion of black and white rather than shades of gray."

Sullivan, a centrist Democrat who served in office from 1987 to 1995, has never registered as a Republican. "But this is different," he said.

"We have a choice between the politics of courage, character and integrity or revenge, vindication and chaos," Sullivan said. "That's not the kind of politics I know. And that's not the politics that I think have existed in my political life."

"It's not a very difficult choice," he added.





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Lauren Miller, Star-Tribune

Sullivan and his wife have lived in their Casper home for decades and are well known in the neighborhood. In mid-June, they put a Cheney sign in their front yard. They still have not decided what to do with the bright blue Cheney bumper sticker that lays on their kitchen counter.

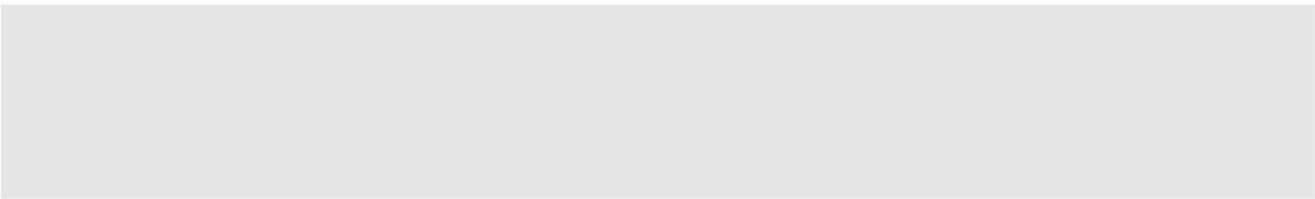
For Sullivan, this race caused him to rethink a principle he's held for decades.

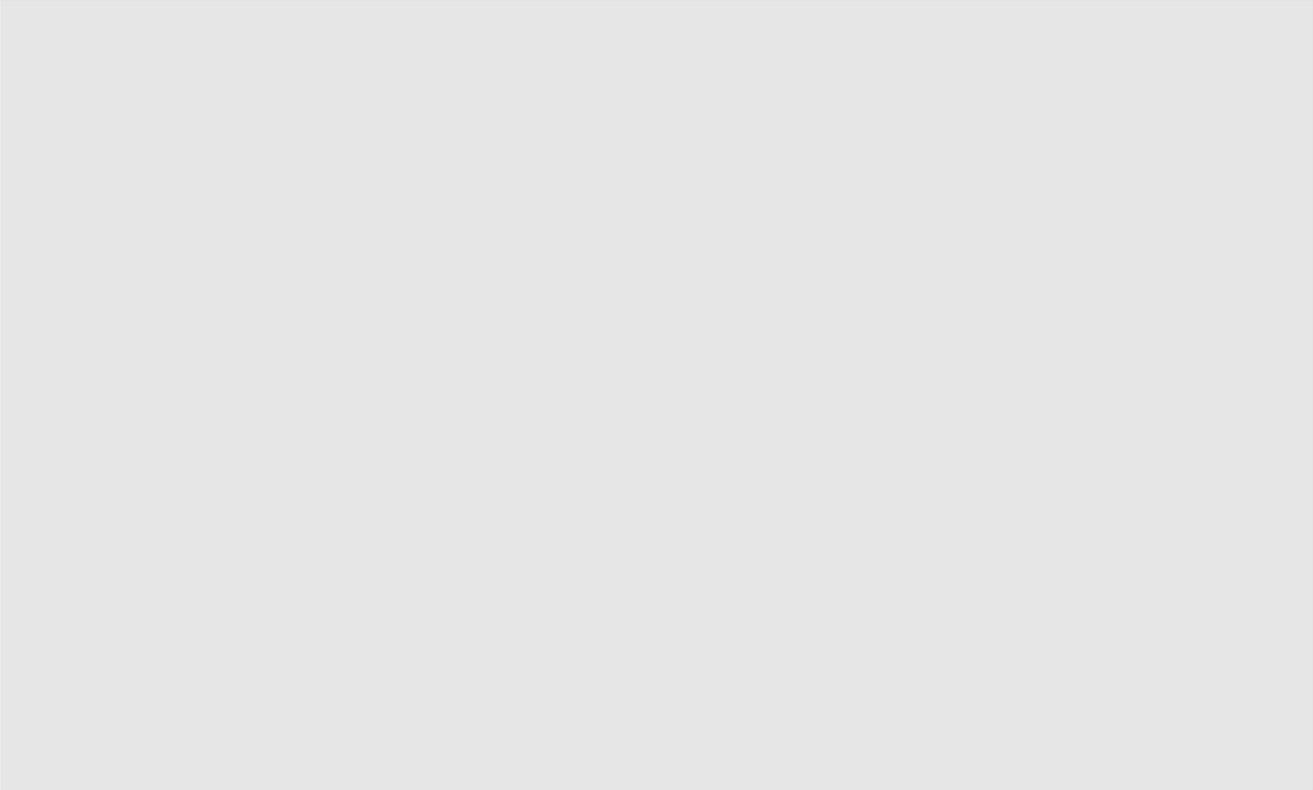
"I just didn't think that it was something that a former Democratic Governor oughta do -- register as a Republican," he said.

Crossing over

There are two main factors that drive crossover voting in Wyoming. The first is that state law allows for same-day voter registration and party changes, meaning a Democrat or independent can walk into the polls on Aug. 16, change their party to Republican, cast a ballot for Cheney, and still switch back in time for the general election in November.

Plus, Republicans dominate Wyoming politics to an extent that Democrats have less to lose by not participating in their own primary.





A Liz Cheney signs is seen Wednesday in Casper. Cheney is facing the toughest reelection fight of her career.

Lauren Miller, Star-Tribune

The Cheney campaign has subtly acknowledged that Wyoming Democrats will cross over. Recently, the campaign started providing instructions on her website and in mailers for how to change party affiliation to vote for Cheney.

Cheney is unapologetic about seeking support from beyond her own party.

“I’ve been a conservative Republican since I first voted for Ronald Reagan in 1984. I encourage everyone with principles who loves our country to exercise their right to vote,” she previously said. “And, damn right, I will continue to give every voter in Wyoming a list of all the key rules for casting ballots in our state. If any eligible voter living in Wyoming wishes to become a Republican, they are free to do so. That is their right.”

More poll analysis

The Casper Star-Tribune is planning a series of stories tied to its recent poll of likely

voters in Wyoming's Republican primary.

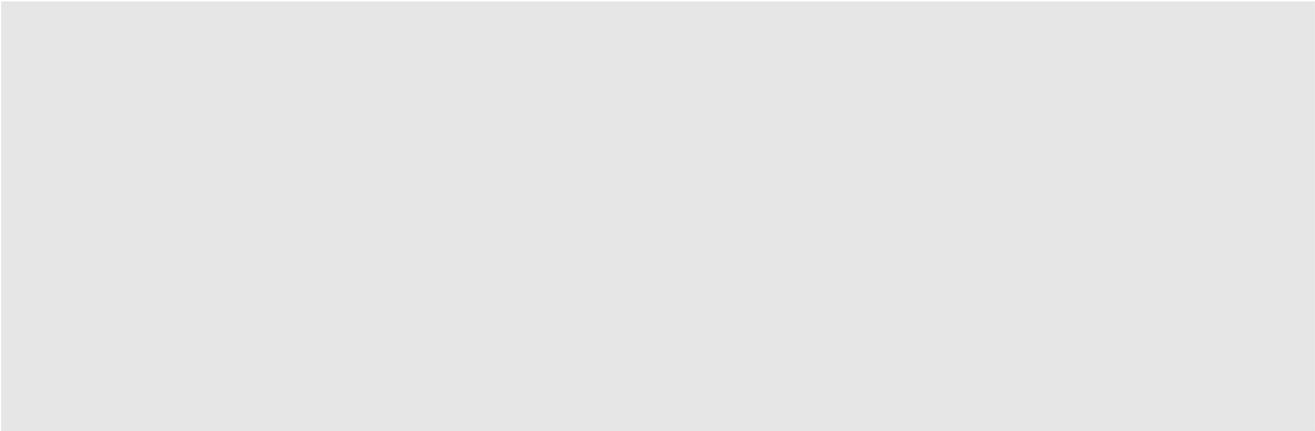
- **Today:** Hageman takes a commanding lead
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'This isn't about politics'

Democrats knew in the past that their vote had less impact in such a red state, but they were voting based on policies then. Now, Democrats say, they're voting on something entirely different.

"I don't think [Democrats] are choosing Cheney for anything that she really stands for," King said. "They are rejecting the candidate, the former president, that Hageman is tying her campaign to."

Rob Johnston and his partner have lived in Wyoming since 2002 and have been registered Democrats almost the entire time. Johnston, his partner and three other couples successfully sued the state of Wyoming in 2014 for their right to be recognized as a married couple, and for the right of other gay people to marry the person they choose. At that time, Cheney -- whose sister is a lesbian -- opposed gay marriage, though she's since said her opposition was wrong.



Rob Johnston, a lifelong Democrat, plans to change political parties and vote for Liz Cheney in the Republican primary. There was a time, Johnston says, where he would have called someone nuts for telling him that he would one day vote for Cheney.

Lauren Miller, Star-Tribune

Back then, Johnston said he would have called anyone "nuts" for saying he'd be voting for Cheney in the future. Now, he calls it a "no-brainer."

"When I saw her comments and her leadership in the Jan. 6 hearings ... I was like, 'There's no mistake.' She represented, for me, a woman with guts and determination, who wanted to look and find out what the facts were before moving on," he said.

Democrats and independents say they aren't taking the decision to cross over lightly. But the stakes, they say, are so high that they must.

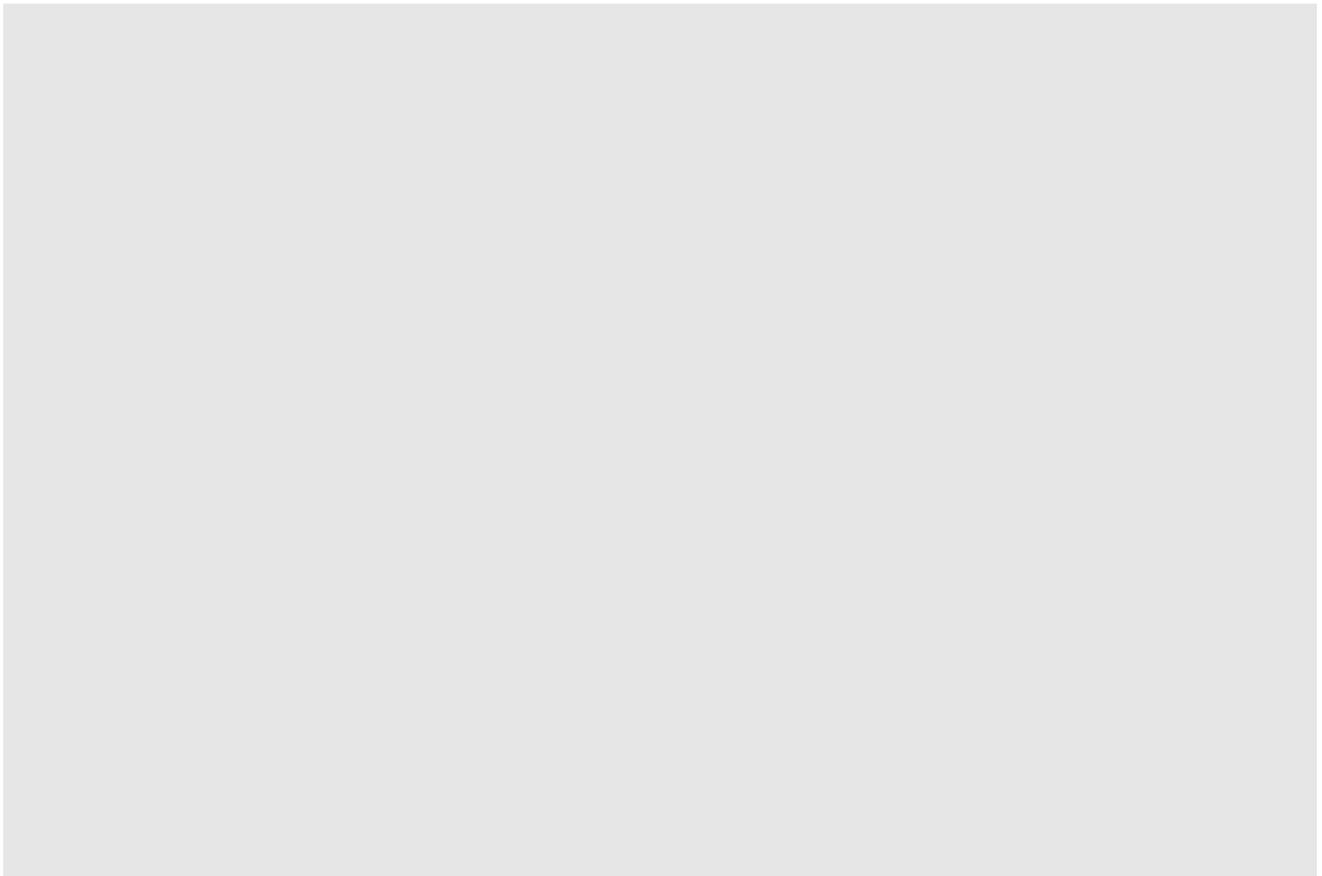
"She is the worst type of Republican that I'd never touch with a 10-foot pole, but she's not willing to go down the road saying that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president," said Kim Holloway, a former member of the Casper City Council and a self-described socialist Democrat.

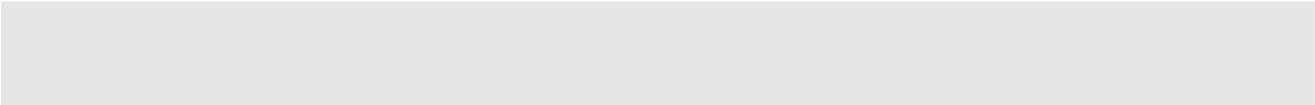
"Liz Cheney has elevated herself by saying a bunch of rich and powerful people should be held accountable, which should be the bare minimum," Ewalt said. "I have to remember that that is the bare minimum, but she's the only one that's above that right now."

"It's not something that I want to do or be a part of because I'm not a member of the Republican Party, and I'm Wyoming enough to mind my own f***** business," said Walt Tanner, who's lived in Casper for over half his life and whose family homesteaded in Wyoming shortly before it was a state in the 1880s. "But at the same time, some members of the Republican Party have taken on such extreme positions that they've made it my business. I'm going to stand up and protect my family. This isn't about politics."

A number of Wyoming Democrats say they're voting for Cheney to maintain the Wyoming they "know and love" and to fight back against a brand of politics that scares them.

"Crossing over has everything to do with my defense of the dignity of this place, and for our ability to peacefully disagree with one another. I'm really really scared," Tanner said. "When it comes down to it, if my small voice can, like maybe, maybe help do something against outright authoritarianism that is willing to be violent when they don't get their way. I'm gonna do it."





Signs in support of Liz Cheney are seen on Tuesday in Casper. A newly released poll shows Cheney trailing her chief rival Harriet Hageman by a wide margin.

Lauren Miller, Star-Tribune

The cold, hard numbers

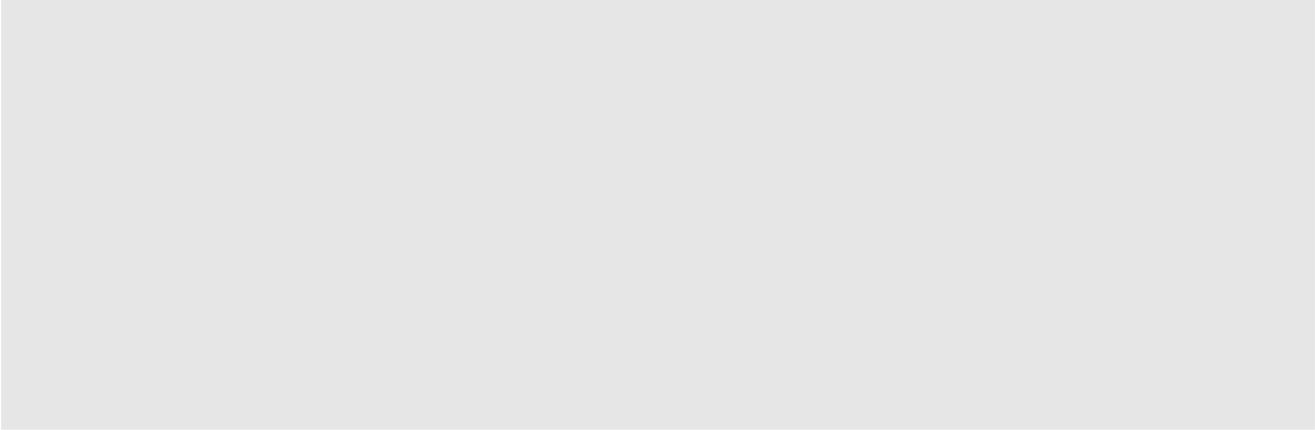
There are indications that left-leaning Wyomingites are planning to cross over at levels rarely seen here.

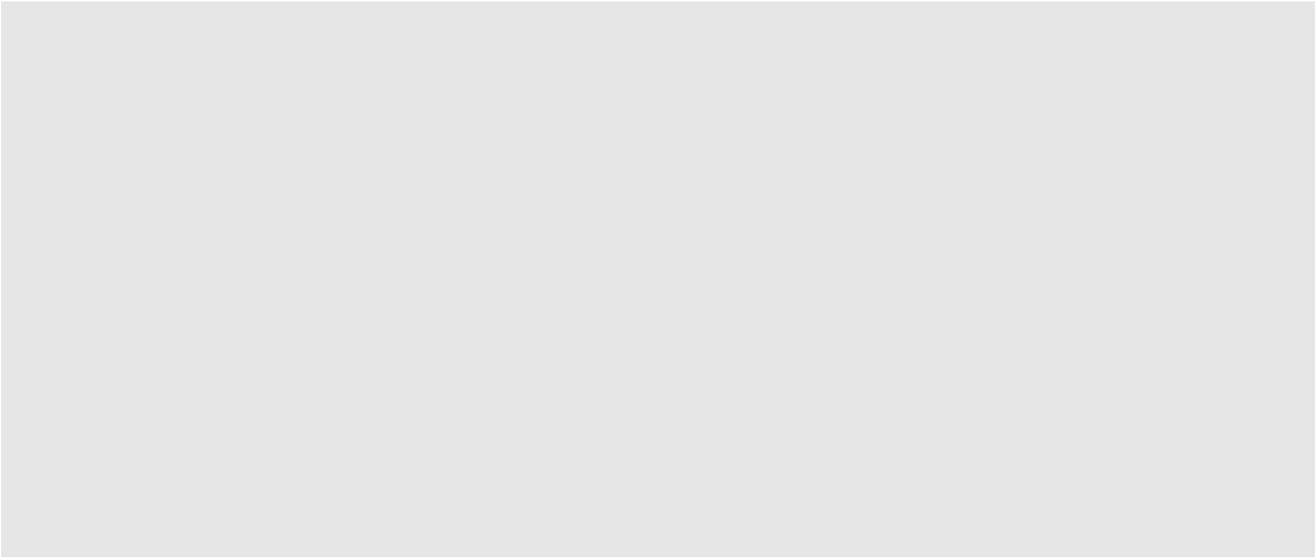
From January to July, the number of affiliated Democrats in Wyoming has decreased by 2,537. In 2018 and 2014 -- the previous two midterm election cycles -- that figure was 21 and 177, respectively.

In other words, the number of Democrats who have left the party over the first six months of the year is roughly 120 times higher this year than it was in 2018.

Independent registration also bucked previous trends. From January to July, independent (or unaffiliated) registration decreased by 419, whereas in the last two midterm election cycles it increased. In 2018, the number of independents grew by 332. In 2014, they increased by 512.

Given that Wyoming allows same-day party changes and registration, the crossover numbers this time around will almost certainly be higher. But because of the relatively small number of Democrats in Wyoming, the practice is unlikely to be enough for Cheney.





Liz Cheney yard signs wait to be delivered on Wednesday in Casper. Cheney is facing the toughest reelection fight of her career.

Lauren Miller, Star-Tribune

This month, the Star-Tribune commissioned Mason-Dixon Polling to survey likely voters in the Republican primary. That poll showed 12% of voters will be participating for the first time in the Republican Primary. Of those, 90% are Democrats and independents.

But even factoring in their participation, the poll showed Hageman 22 points ahead of Cheney -- a commanding lead with the primary around the corner.

"Certainly, it's a situation where if we come down to 1,000 votes, the Democrats who crossed over to participate in the Republican primary have potential to determine the outcome," King said. "If it's 5,000 votes, either way, no."

Fear and apprehension

Many Wyoming Democrats who plan to crossover declined to go on the record for this story out of fear of backlash and concern that publicly doing so could affect their jobs. It's not voting for Cheney that gives them pause, as much as the act of changing parties. Many Republicans oppose crossover voting, and Trump himself unsuccessfully lobbied the Wyoming Legislature to do away with the practice earlier this year.

“How you're treated” and “the opportunities for promotion or good working environment would all be at risk if I truly spoke my mind,” said one Casper Democrat under the condition of anonymity. They plan to cross over.

"I do in some ways worry that people get so enraged when others don't agree with them that there could be ... some risks to me or my property or my pets," said a Casper Democrat, who voted for Bernie Sanders in the 2020 presidential primary.

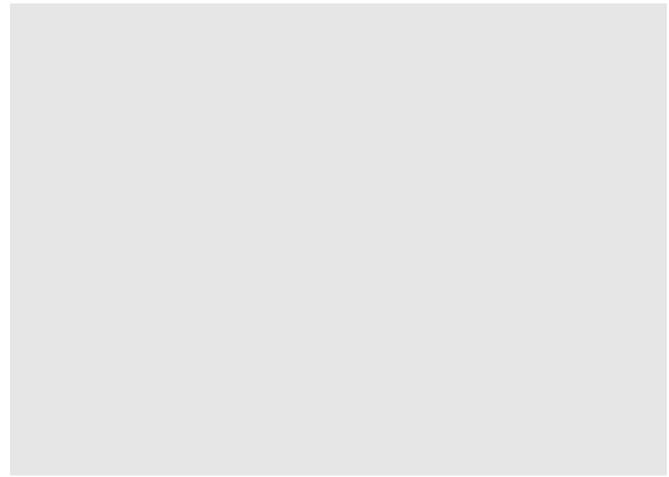
She moved here from a liberal city in 2014, and so far she and her husband have only told their families and a very small number of friends that they're crossing over.

"And there are definitely some friends that I've chosen not to tell," she said. "I have definitely learned to be much quieter here."

When 79-year-old Cheyenne resident Pat Lauber replied to a tweet on Twitter saying she would be crossing over, she said she "almost immediately" got four direct messages from strangers' accounts calling her a communist.

That said, many of the people planning to cross over say they feel a sense of obligation to cast a vote for Cheney that extends beyond fear or policies they don't agree with.

"What does it say about us that we're willing to forget all of the foundational principles of this country? And what would it say about us if we prove the whole country wrong, and Liz got nominated?" Sullivan, the former governor, said. "I mean, I think that would send an equally strong message.



Local Casper activist Jane Ifland poses for a portrait Tuesday. Ifland is a Democrat, but she plans to cross over and vote as a Republican for Rep. Liz Cheney.

Lauren Miller, Star-Tribune

"This is an important and maybe historic time, and I'd hate for us to pick the wrong position."

Follow state politics reporter Victoria Eavis on Twitter @Victoria_Eavis

By Victoria Eavis

State politics reporter
