

The Keys to the White House:



Final Prediction for the 2020 Election

Allan J. Lichtman

In January of this year, I informed readers of *Social Education* that the presidential election was too close to call and that I had not yet made a final prediction. I am now prepared to share that final prediction with you. The verdict of the Keys to the White House is that Donald Trump will become the first sitting president since Bill Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush, in 1992, to lose a reelection bid.

The grim prospect for Trump this November is the consequence both of the crises that unexpectedly scourged the nation in 2020 and his ineffective response. In early 2020, everything changed in America with the raging COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide protests against racial injustice. Although Trump acknowledged my prediction of his 2016 win with a gracious signed personal note saying “Congrats-Good Call,” he failed to grasp the deeper meaning of the Keys system: that it is governing not campaigning that counts.¹ The strategy he deployed as a challenger will not work for an incumbent president. A president cannot talk his way out of crises. The extraordinary events of 2020 and President Trump’s

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feckless response now foretell his defeat this November. Never before in the history of the American presidency has such a dramatic reversal of fortune occurred in such a brief time.


Changes in the Keys During 2020

At the beginning of 2020, Trump was only down four negative keys, two keys short of the six needed to predict his defeat. Earlier, I had thought that he might have lost a fifth key because of the disaster that followed his withdrawal from Syria. However, Syria has faded

from American public consciousness, so I no longer count that key against Trump’s reelection. As I explained in my article for *Social Education* in January, Trump had lost Mandate Key 1, Scandal Key 9, Foreign/Military Success Key 11, and Incumbent Charisma Key 12.²

The announced treaty between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and recently Bahrain did not change my negative call on Key 11. The treaty has barely made a ripple in the United States and was scarcely mentioned in the Republican National Convention. It does not advance peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It may lead to more violence in the Middle East, especially in the horror that is Yemen, because it seems to have come with the bribe of the sale of advanced military hardware to the UAE at least. It also has a big loophole in that it only suspends but does not end further West Bank annexations. I did not count as a major success the much more significant peace treaty between Israel and Jordan that President Bill Clinton brokered in 1994 or the Paris Accords on Climate Change, or the Iran Nuclear Accords.

Table 1: The Verdict of the 13 Keys to the White House

KEY 1	Party mandate: After the midterm elections, the incumbent party holds more seats in the U.S. House of Representatives than it did after the previous midterm elections.	FALSE
KEY 2	Contest: There is no serious contest for the incumbent party nomination.	TRUE
KEY 3	Incumbency: The incumbent-party candidate is the sitting president.	TRUE
KEY 4	Third party: There is no significant third-party or independent campaign.	TRUE
KEY 5	Short-term economy: The economy is not in recession during the election campaign.	FALSE
KEY 6	Long-term economy: Real per-capita economic growth during the term equals or exceeds mean growth during the previous two terms.	FALSE
KEY 7	Policy change: The incumbent administration effects major changes in national policy.	TRUE
KEY 8	Social unrest: There is no sustained social unrest during the term.	FALSE
KEY 9	Scandal: The incumbent administration is untainted by major scandal.	FALSE
KEY 10	Foreign/military failure: The incumbent administration suffers no major failure in foreign or military affairs.	TRUE
KEY 11	Foreign/military success: The incumbent administration achieves a major success in foreign or military affairs.	FALSE
KEY 12	Incumbent charisma: The incumbent-party candidate is charismatic or a national hero.	FALSE
KEY 13	Challenger charisma: The challenging-party candidate is not charismatic or a national hero.	TRUE
 Keys Favor the Democratic Candidate in 2020		True: 6 Keys False: 7 Keys

The Keys are diagnostic propositions. When a key is false, the challenging party wins. When five or fewer of these keys are false (i.e., turned against the party in the White House), that party wins another turn in office. When six or more are false, the challenging party wins.

However, three additional keys have since fallen against the president, giving him seven negative keys, one more than is necessary to predict his defeat. (See Table 1)

- **Short Term Economy Key 5:** On June 8, 2020, the National Bureau of Economic Research ruled that

the U.S. economy had fallen into recession. In addition, there have now been two consecutive quarters of negative growth, locking in Key 5 against Trump.

- **Long Term Economy Key 6:** Real per-capita economic growth declined on an annual basis by a

revised 5 percent in the first quarter of 2020 and a record 32.9 percent in the second quarter. Even with some later recovery these declines are more than sufficient to drive average growth during the full Trump term well below the average for Obama's two terms, forfeiting Key 6. Most economic forecasts indicate that even with significant recovery in the third quarter, real economic growth this year will decline by 4 to 5 percent.

- **Social Unrest Key 8:** Social unrest including episodes of violence has been sustained for several months. This disorder has raised concerns that remain unresolved and have little prospect of resolution prior to the election, given the resistance to reform on the part of Trump and congressional Republicans, costing Trump Key 8.

Unlike polls and poll compilations, the Keys indicate precisely what factors will decide who will be the next president of the United States. It is important to continue to ignore the pundits and the pollsters and keep your eye on the big picture represented by the Keys. However, on a note of caution, there are sadly two unpredictable factors that could skew election results beyond the scope of the keys. Trump and his Republican allies will likely do everything in their power to suppress voting, aided and abetted by the vicissitudes of the pandemic. They have already sought to limit voting by mail, a viable and perhaps necessary option if COVID-19 continues to ravage the nation. There is every prospect that Russia will again attempt to intervene in the election on Donald Trump's behalf. The Russian intelligence services learned much from their 2016 meddling and this year's operation may well be more sophisticated and effective, perhaps even targeting registration records and voter tallies. Already, Trump is welcoming Russia interference,

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while pressuring his intelligence agencies to downplay the intrusion.

On a positive note, the Keys have implications for governing the country and conducting presidential campaigns. The Keys show that what counts in presidential elections is governing, as measured by the consequential events of a presidential term, not packaging, image making, or campaigning. If candidates understood how elections really worked, they would avoid the kind of empty, scripted, and consultant-driven campaigns that the American people have too often endured. Instead, they would strive to conduct substantive contests for the presidency and establish the foundations for governing the country during the next four years, thereby improving the prospects for themselves or their party to win another term. Candidates should reveal the legislation and executive orders they plan for their first 100 days, and reveal the kinds of persons they would appoint to the cabinet, the White House staff, and the judiciary. 🌐

Notes

1. Allan J. Lichtman, "The Keys to the White House," *Social Education* (October 2016), 257.
2. Allan J. Lichtman, "The 2020 Presidential Election: How the Keys Are Pointing," *Social Education* (January-February 2020), 13–17 at pages 15–16.

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