

The Keys to the White House: The Outlook for 2024

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Since 1996, I have apprised readers of *Social Education* of my predicted presidential election results based on the Keys to the White House. The Keys are a historical-based index system for predicting the results of American presidential elections that have been successful since 1984. The Keys gauge the strength and performance of the party holding the White House. If six or more keys turn against the White House party, they are predicted losers (see Table 1). In 2016, in defiance of polls and pundits, the Keys predicted Donald Trump's victory, and in 2020, the Keys predicted that he would become the first president since George H. W. Bush in 1992 to lose a reelection bid (see Table 2 on p. 8).

The Big Picture of Presidential Elections

Under pressure to cover the presidential election nearly day by day, the media focused on the horse-race polls that independent and partisan organizations issue in abundance. However, polls taken months before an election had zero predictive value, leading to outlandish forecasting errors. In June of the election year 1988, Republican candidate George H. W. Bush trailed his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, by 17 percent, according to the Gallup poll. Bush ultimately defeated Dukakis by 8 percent, for a 25-point swing. Even late polls can be misleading. In 1980, a Gallup poll two weeks before the election showed Republican challenger Ronald Reagan trailing Democratic President Jimmy Carter by 8 percent. Reagan ultimately defeated Carter by 10 percent, for an 18-point swing. In 2012, the final Gallup poll just before the election showed President Barack Obama trailing challenger Mitt Romney by 1 percent. Obama ultimately defeated Romney by 4 percent, for a 5-point swing in just a few days.

This work presents a unique model for explaining and predicting the outcome of presidential contests, including 2024. The Keys to the White House model does not use horse-race polls or presidential approval ratings. It does not focus primarily on economic trends. Instead, the Keys consist of 13 simple true/false questions based on the insight that presidential elections are votes up or down on the broadly defined strength and performance of the party holding the White House. That is, governing, not campaigning, counts in electing the American president.

The Keys gauge the big picture of a president's record, such as midterm election results, internal nomination contests, third-party challenges, the short- and long-term economy, policy change, social unrest, scandal, and foreign and military failures and successes. Only two keys relate to the candidates, asking whether the incumbent or challenging party candidate is a once-in-generation broadly inspirational, charismatic figure. Unlike most academic models, the Key model's questions are simple and easy for anyone to understand and even use on their own. The Keys make for a good interview or commentary; anyone can weigh in with their ideas.

Answers to some of the questions posed in the Keys require the kind of informed evaluations that historians invariably rely on in drawing conclusions about past events. Two constraints distinguish these assessments from the ad hoc judgments offered by conventional political commentators. First, all judgment calls are made consistently across elections; the threshold standards established in the study of previous elections must be applied to future contests. Second, each Key has an explicit definition, briefly summarized in Table 1.

The Keys to the White House demonstrate that

politics as usual by the challenging candidate will have no impact on results. Whether or not the sitting president is seeking reelection, the American electorate chooses a president according to how well the White House party has governed the nation, as measured by the consequential events and episodes of a term. Nothing a candidate has said or done during a campaign, when the public discounts everything as political, has changed his prospects at the polls. Debates, advertising, television appearances, news coverage, and campaign strategies—the usual grist for the punditry mills—count for virtually nothing on Election Day.

The media spend hundreds of millions of dollars covering presidential general election campaigns, like horse races, with candidates darting ahead and falling behind, even before a single vote is cast. This horse race coverage only promotes negative, shallow, soundbite-driven campaigns.

Where the Keys Stand for 2024

As of this writing in late December 2023,

circumstances are so fluid that I have made no final prediction for the general election. However, unlike any other model at the onset of the election year, the Keys offer unique insight into the 2024 contest (see Table 3 on p. 9). Despite grouching among Democrats about Biden’s age and energy, he represents the best bet for a Democratic victory. With Biden running again, the incumbent Democrats secure two Keys, Incumbency Key 3 and Contest Key 2, because he lacks serious challengers. Neither of his current opponents, author Marian Williamson and Minnesota Rep. Dean Phillips, are likely to dent Biden’s overwhelming support among Democratic primary and caucus voters. They would thus need six more negative Keys to become a predicted loser. If Biden doesn’t run, they lose the Incumbency and the Contest Key because the party lacks an obvious heir apparent. Only four more Keys would have to fall to predict the Democrats’ defeat. The White House party has lost every election during the past 100 years in which there is an open seat and

Table 1. **The 13 Keys to the White House**

The Keys are statements that favor the reelection of the incumbent party. When five or fewer statements are false, the incumbent party wins. When six or more are false, the challenging party wins.

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.

effects major changes in national policy.

KEY 8 (Social unrest): There is no sustained social unrest during the term.

KEY 2 (Contest): There is no serious contest for the incumbent-party nomination.

KEY 9 (Scandal): The incumbent administration is untainted by major scandal.

KEY 3 (Incumbency): The incumbent-party candidate is the sitting president.

KEY 10 (Foreign/military failure): The incumbent administration suffers no major failure in foreign or military affairs.

KEY 4 (Third party): There is no significant third-party or independent campaign.

KEY 11 (Foreign/military success): The incumbent administration achieves a major success in foreign or military affairs.

KEY 5 (Short-term economy): The economy is not in recession during the election campaign.

KEY 12 (Incumbent charisma): The incumbent-party candidate is charismatic or a national hero.

KEY 6 (Long-term economy): Real per-capita economic growth during the term equals or exceeds mean growth during the previous two terms.

KEY 13 (Challenger charisma): The challenging-party candidate is not charismatic or a national hero.

KEY 7 (Policy change): The incumbent administration

Table 2. **Published Keys Model Predictions for Elections from 1984 to 2020**

Election	Date of prediction	Source
1984	April 1982	“How to Bet in ’84,” <i>Washingtonian</i> , April 1982
1988	May 1988	“How to Bet in November,” <i>Washingtonian</i> , May 1988
1992	September 1992	“The Keys to the White House,” <i>Montgomery Journal</i> , Sept. 14, 1992
1996	October 1996	“Who Will Be the Next President?” <i>Social Education</i> , Oct. 1996
2000	November 1999	“The Keys to Election 2000,” <i>Social Education</i> , Nov/Dec 1999
2004	April 2003	“The Keys to the White House,” <i>Montgomery Gazette</i> , April 25, 2003
2008	February 2006	“Forecast for 2008,” <i>Foresight</i> , Feb. 2006
2012	January 2010	“Preliminary Forecast for 2012,” <i>International Journal of Information Systems and Social Change</i> , Jan-March 2010
2016	September 2016	“Trump is Headed for a Win, Says Professor Who Has Predicted 30 Years of Presidential Outcomes Correctly,” <i>Washington Post</i> , Sept. 23, 2016
2020	August 2020	“He Predicted Trump’s Win in 2016, Now He’s Ready to Call 2020,” <i>New York Times</i> , Aug. 5, 2020

an incumbent party nomination battle.

Biden has locked in two other keys, Policy Change Key 7 and Challenger Charisma Key 13. Biden made significant changes in the policies adopted under President Trump. Through executive orders, he rescinded much of Trump’s orders on immigration and environmental regulations and rejoined the Paris Accords on climate change. He pushed through Congress his most crucial policy initiative, the tax reform and climate change bill, without a single Republican vote. His infrastructure bill passed Congress with only 13 Republican votes in the House and 15 in the Senate.

None of the Republican aspirants for the presidential nomination is a broadly charismatic candidate like, for example, Democrat Franklin Roosevelt or Republican Ronald Reagan. The frontrunner, Donald Trump, is a consummate showman who commands media attention but appeals only to a narrow slice of the electorate rather than achieving broad appeal like Reagan. There were many Reagan Democrats, but virtually no Trump Democrats.

Several other Keys lean in Biden’s favor: Social Unrest Key 8, Scandal Key 9, Short-Term Economy Key 5, and Long-Term Economy Key 6.

No widespread social unrest that threatens the nation’s stability has emerged during Biden’s term. The Republicans’ impeachment inquiry, launched on a straight party-line vote in the U.S. House, is a political maneuver with no basis in fact. The Republicans have been trying to pin something illegal on Joe Biden for years and have come up empty. Even their selected expert witnesses at a recent hearing admitted that there was insufficient evidence for an impeachment case against Biden. What Republicans are cynically trying to do without evidence is muddy the waters—to make voters think that Trump is no worse than Biden. There may be a backlash against Republicans for pursuing what appears to be a partisan, political impeachment, just as there was a backlash against Republicans for the 1998 impeachment inquiry of Bill Clinton.

In terms of the economy, real per-capita economic growth during the Biden term thus far substantially exceeds the record of the previous two terms. It would take an early and deep 2024 recession for the White House party to forfeit Key 6. For the election year, there is no recession currently on the horizon. However, the economic situation could change, especially if Republicans fail to vote on a budget extension and shut down the

government, with ripple effects on the economy, perhaps toppling Key 5.

Biden has lost two keys. He lost the Mandate Key 1, due to Republican gains in the 2022 mid-term U.S. House elections. He also fails to secure the Incumbent Charisma Key 12. Biden lacks broad inspirational appeal. His approval ratings are among the lowest for any president, and his age weighs against him.

Three other keys lean against Biden: Third Party Key 4, Foreign/Military Failure Key 10, and Foreign/Military Success Key 11. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., has exceeded the 10 percent threshold needed to turn this Key in much early polling. However, the actual test of his candidacy will come after the major party conventions. The war in Ukraine seems to have ground to a stalemate, with the American public increasingly skeptical of additional American aid to Ukraine. The war in the Middle East has wrought death and destruction upon Palestinian civilians in Gaza with no end in sight.

What to Look for Before November

Keep your eye on the big picture of the Keys and ignore the pundits and the pollsters. Although a final prediction is not currently feasible, unlike other models, the Keys indicate what to look for

before November. Currently, the Keys slightly favor Biden’s reelection. Biden would lose five—one short of a predicted defeat—if the Keys fall as they now lean. However, economic forecasts are notoriously problematic, and social unrest could always emerge before the election. Although unlikely, it remains remotely possible that the Republicans pin a scandal on the president. On the plus side for Biden, it is possible but not likely that the Ukraine war could become a military and foreign policy success. It is also quite conceivable that the Kennedy campaign fizzles once major party nominees are selected.

Beyond the scope of the Keys, there are two unique circumstances in 2024. At 81, Biden will be the oldest major party presidential candidate in U.S. history, topping Ronald Reagan in 1984 by 8 years. More significant are the unprecedented 91 felony indictments against Trump, including charges that he subverted American democracy and jeopardized the nation’s security. These are the most important indictments in the history of the United States, more important than the indictments of the Watergate conspirators or the atomic bomb spies.

Trump is a proven master of delay and may succeed in postponing his trials until after the

Table 3. **The 13 Keys to the White House: Current Standings**

KEY NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	OUTCOME 2024
KEY 1	PARTY MANDATE	FALSE
KEY 2	CONTEST	TRUE
KEY 3	INCUMBENCY	TRUE
KEY 4	THIRD PARTY	LEANS FALSE*
KEY 5	SHORT-TERM ECONOMY	LEANS TRUE*
KEY 6	LONG-TERM ECONOMY	LEANS TRUE*
KEY 7	POLICY CHANGE	TRUE
KEY 8	SOCIAL UNREST	LEANS TRUE*
KEY 9	SCANDAL	LEANS TRUE*
KEY 10	FOREIGN/MILITARY FAILURE	LEANS FALSE*
KEY 11	FOREIGN/MILITARY SUCCESS	LEANS FALSE*
KEY 12	INCUMBENT CHARISMA	FALSE
KEY 13	CHALLENGER CHARISMA	TRUE

* Keys with some possibility of changing before November.

TRUE: 4 KEYS; LEANS TRUE: 4 KEYS; FALSE: 2 KEYS; LEANS FALSE: 3 KEYS.

election. However, if that ploy fails and Trump is tried and found guilty of serious felonies, this will scramble the race for president in unknown ways, given the lack of historical antecedents for analysis.

Campaigning by the Keys

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 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 explain their vision for the subsequent four years, specify the intended bills and executive orders of their first 100 days, and indicate the kinds of persons they would elevate to the cabinet, the White House, and the Supreme Court. ■



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