

The Updated Verdict of the Keys

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In January, I wrote in *Social Education* that according to the Keys to the White House, “the winds of political change are blowing through America in 2008” in a way that favors the Democrats in the November presidential election. Despite the surprise nomination of John McCain and the protracted primary battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, nothing fundamental has changed in the last nine months to alter that verdict.

The Keys are a historically based prediction system that I developed in collaboration with Russian scientist Volodia Keilis-Borok, an authority on the mathematics of prediction models. The Keys retrospectively account for the winners of the popular vote of every presidential election from 1860 through 1980 and prospectively forecast the winners of the popular vote in all six presidential elections from 1984 through 2004. The system is based on the theory that a pragmatic electorate chooses a president according to the performance of the party holding the White House as gauged by the consequential events and episodes of a term. Debates, advertising, television appearances, news coverage and campaign strategies—the usual grist for the punditry mills—count for virtually nothing on Election Day. If the party holding the Oval Office performs well, as measured by the Keys, it gains another four years in office. If it performs poorly, the challenging party wins.

Neither the Keys nor any other prediction system, of course, can take into account the unprecedented nomination of an African American candidate by the favored challenging party. We will not know the influence of the potentially confounding issue of race until people enter the polling booth. However, the

keys have predicted election results since 1860 and have so far proven accurate despite enormous changes in our politics, economy, and society.

The Keys consist of 13 diagnostic questions. Each key is phrased as a proposition that favors re-election of the incumbent party, in this case the Republicans (see the accompanying Table). When six or more of these propositions are false the party in power loses the popular vote.

My article for *Social Education* this January indicated that eight keys were counted against the incumbent Republicans, two more than necessary to predict its defeat. Eight keys remain turned against the GOP, although two keys have shifted position, one in favor of the party in power and the other in favor of the challengers. The near consensus nomination of John McCain avoided an expected party battle and turned Contest Key 2 in favor of the party in power. The emergence of Barack Obama as a charismatic candidate, however, turned Charisma Key 13 against the GOP.

The following eight Keys are turned against the incumbent party.

- The Republican Party’s losses in the 2006 midterm elections cost it Key 1 (Mandate).

- Bush’s inability to run again in 2008 prevents his party from benefiting from Key 3 (Incumbency).
- The lagging economy costs the Republicans Long-Term Economy Key 6.
- Bush has not achieved the second-term policy revolution needed to secure Policy Change Key 7 for the GOP.
- The lingering wars in Iraq and Afghanistan turn Foreign/Military Failure Key 10 against the Republicans.
- The inability to achieve a foreign policy accomplishment equivalent to winning a war or achieving a historic breakthrough in diplomacy costs the Republicans Foreign/Military Success Key 11.
- John McCain performed heroically but has not led the nation through war like Dwight Eisenhower, so the GOP loses Incumbent Charisma/Hero Key 12.
- Barack Obama’s emergence as a once-in-a-generation inspiring candidate results in the loss to the Republicans of Challenger Charisma/Hero Key 13.

The following five keys favor the incumbent Republican Party:

- The lack of serious opposition within the GOP to John McCain preserves Contest Key 2 for the GOP.
- Third-party candidates Ralph Nader and Bob Barr are most unlikely to reach the five percent threshold necessary to turn the Third-Party Key 4 against the party in power.
- At the time this article was written, Short-Term Economy Key 5 was still in line for the Republicans, though the gathering economic clouds made it uncertain which way the key would be turned on Election Day.
- The absence of social upheavals comparable to the 1960s avoids the loss of Key 8 (Social Unrest).

- The lack of a significant scandal that directly implicates the president averts the loss of Key 9 (Scandal).

The shift in incumbent party prospects between 2004 and 2008 is most clearly illustrated in the first four keys—the political keys. In 2004, the incumbent Republicans secured all four of the political keys. For 2008, Republicans lose two of the political keys. Foreign policy setbacks and Obama’s charisma account for the shift of two other keys since 2004. Overall, the negative forecast for Republican presidential candidates in 2008 does not depend on the performance of the economy. The incumbent party would still lose the presidency in 2008 even if it secured both economic keys.

The Keys have implications for governing the country and conducting presi-

dential 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 inspiring and substantive contests for the presidency and establish the foundations for governing the country during the next four years. 🗳️

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Table. **The 13 Keys To The White House: Current Standings**

The Key	The Statement	The Result
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.	False
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.	True
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.	False
Key 8 Social Unrest	There Is No Sustained Social Unrest During The Term.	True
Key 9 Scandal	The Incumbent Administration Is Untainted By Major Scandal.	True
Key 10 Foreign/MiLitary Failure	The Incumbent Administration Suffers No Major Failure In Foreign Or Military Affairs.	False
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.	False

TRUE: 5 KEYS

FALSE: 8 KEYS

PREDICTION: REPUBLICANS LOSE

When five or fewer of these propositions are false, the party holding the White House wins the popular vote in the presidential election. When six or more are false, the challenging party wins.