

The Keys to the White House

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The Keys to the White House is a historically-based system for predicting the result of the popular vote in American presidential elections. The Keys system tracks the big picture of how well the party holding the White House has governed and does not shift with events of the campaign. This model gives specificity to the idea that it is governance, not campaigning, that counts in these elections. In the March 2012 issue of *Social Education* I wrote, “In what may be the sternest test of the system to date, given high unemployment and sluggish economic growth, the Keys point to an Obama victory, regardless of the state of the economy in 2012.” Today, the prediction of an Obama victory this year remains firm.

According to the conventional wisdom, America’s continuing economic woes should make it difficult for Barack Obama to win election to a second term. Some of the academic models that turn on economic statistics sustain this grim forecast for the president. Based on the economy alone, it would be foolhardy to predict an Obama victory in November. However, the Keys model does not presume that voters are driven by economic concerns alone. Voters are less narrow-minded and more sophisticated than that; they decide presidential elections on a wide-ranging assessment of the performance of the party holding the White House, all of which are reflected in one or more keys.

For example, analysts presume that foreign policy does not matter this year, because it is so little discussed in the campaign. Yet for decades Republicans have blasted Democrats for allegedly being “soft” on matters of national security and world affairs. The relative absence of such attacks this year reflects Obama’s successful record in these areas of policy,

which secures him the two foreign policy keys included in the Keys model. What is unsaid in the campaign may be as important as what is said.

I first developed the Keys to the White House in 1981, in collaboration with mathematician Vladimir Keilis-Borok. Retrospectively, we found that the Keys correctly accounted for the results of American presidential elections from 1860 to 1980, ranging from the horse and buggy days of American politics to the era of jet planes, polls, and television. The relationship between governing and politics uncovered by the Keys thus held true across nearly 120 years of American history and vast changes in our economy, society, and politics: suffrage for women and minorities; new immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America; the rise of the corporation; and the advent of new technologies.

The track record of advance prediction by the Keys since 1981 should provide confidence in its forecast for 2012. The Keys system has correctly forecast the results of all seven presidential elections

from 1984 to 2008, usually months or even years prior to Election Day and often in contradiction to the polls. For example, the Keys forecast George H.W. Bush’s 1988 victory in the late spring of that year, when Bush trailed Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis by 17 points in the polls. The Keys correctly predicted the outcome of the difficult to call 2004 election in April 2003. In early 2006, the Keys already forecast a Democratic victory in 2008, regardless of the identity of the major party nominees. This prediction was correct despite the unprecedented nomination of an African American candidate by the Democratic Party.

As a national system, the Keys predict the popular vote, not the state-by-state tally of Electoral College votes. However, only once in the last 120 years has the Electoral College vote diverged from the popular vote. That was in the disputed election of 2000, when Republican George W. Bush defeated Democrat Al Gore. Despite narrowly losing the popular vote, Bush won in the Electoral College by holding a 537 vote margin over Gore in Florida when the Supreme Court halted the recounting of ballots.

It is important to distinguish between the published prediction of elections ahead of time and retrospectively accounting for the results of past elections with known outcomes. Retrospectively, the Keys cover the period from 1860 to 1980 and predictively from 1984 to 2008. Too

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. **(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. **(TRUE)**

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. **(TRUE)**

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

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)**

TRUE: 10 KEYS; FALSE: 3 KEYS

PREDICTION: INCUMBENT DEMOCRATS WIN POPULAR VOTE IN 2012

often journalists and academics confuse retrodiction and prediction. This year, for example, University of Colorado Professors Kenneth Bickers and Michael Berry have made headlines with a model which they claim has correctly predicted the results of every presidential election since 1980. In fact, the model has generated not a single correct prediction, but only accounts retrospectively for the known results of past elections. By that standard, the Keys to the White House have been unerringly successful since 1860.

The Keys to the White House are 13 true/false questions, with an answer of true favoring reelection of the party holding the White House. When the answers to five or fewer of these questions are false, the incumbent party wins. When six or more are false, the challenging party wins.

The current lineup of the Keys is the same as in my March article. Only three keys fall against the incumbent Democrats, three fewer than the six negative keys needed to predict the president's defeat. Given this two-key cushion for President Obama, no surprise event prior to the election could conceivably change the verdict of the Keys.

The following ten keys favor the incumbent Democrats.

- Obama is unchallenged for re-nomination, securing Contest Key 2.
- Obama's nomination locks up Incumbency Key 3.
- The absence of any significant third-party challenger secures Third-Party Key 4. Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson may perform well in some states, but is most unlikely to reach the 5 percent threshold in the national popular vote needed to topple this key.
- The fact that the United States has not fallen into a double-dip recession, but remains in a slow recovery, retains Short-Term Economy Key 5.

- The enactment of the health-care bill and other liberal measures, compared to policymaking under Obama's predecessor Republican George W. Bush, secures Policy Change Key 7.
- The absence of sustained, violent upheavals like those of the post-Civil War Reconstruction or the 1960s, avoids loss of the Social Unrest Key 8.
- Unlike the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, no current scandal directly implicates the president in any significant way, averting the loss of Scandal Key 9.
- The president has not suffered a major foreign policy or military failure, comparable to losing the Vietnam War, keeping Foreign/Military Failure Key 10 in line.
- With the elimination of Osama Bin Laden, Obama wins Foreign/Military Success Key 11.
- Republican challenger Mitt Romney lacks the charisma of Ronald Reagan, keeping Democrats from losing the Challenger Charisma/Hero Key 13.
- The following three keys fall against the incumbent Democratic Party this year.
- The party's losses in the 2010 mid-term elections have cost it Mandate Key 1.
- The weak economy during Obama's term forfeits Long-Term Economy Key 6.
- Obama has not regained the magic of his 2008 campaign, and falls short of gaining the Incumbent

Charisma/Hero Key 12.

If candidates came to understand that it is effective governing, not packaging, image making, or campaigning that decides presidential elections, we could have an alternative to today's sound bite, negative, and consultant driven campaigns. Rather than politics as usual, we could have candidates who articulate clearly, boldly, and in detail their vision for the next four years. Win or lose then, presidential contenders would have inspired grassroots activism, tested alternative solutions to national problems, and enhanced our diminished confidence in the American political system. 🌐

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