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# The Keys to the White House: Prediction for 2012

Allan Lichtman

## A New Vision of Presidential Politics

Conventional pundits, pollsters, and forecasters are focused on whether the economy will improve sufficiently in 2012 for President Barack Obama to gain reelection. The Keys to the White House, a prediction system that I developed in collaboration with Vladimir Keilis-Borok, founder of the International Institute of Earthquake Prediction Theory and Mathematical Geophysics, provides a different view of this year's presidential election. I have been sharing with readers of *Social Education* predictions of presidential election results, based on the Keys, since Bob Dole challenged Bill Clinton in 1996. 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.

Retrospectively, the Keys model accounts for the popular vote winner of every American presidential election since 1860. Prospectively, it has correctly forecast the popular vote winner of all seven presidential elections from 1984 to 2008, usually months or even years prior to Election Day. The Keys are accurate at a time when the polls and other prediction models cannot provide even roughly reliable forecasts. In 2005, for example, the Keys already forecast a Democratic victory in 2008, regardless of the identity of the major party nominees. (See Lichtman, "The Keys to the White House: Forecast for 2008," *Foresight: The International Journal of Applied Forecasting*, Issue 3, 2005). I said at the time that the Democrats could pick a name out of the phone book and elect

that person president in 2008. This year, while Republicans are trying to decide which of their potential candidates seems most electable, the Keys again forecast a Democratic victory, no matter who emerges as the Republican nominee.

## The Keys Model

The Keys are 13 diagnostic questions that are stated as propositions that favor re-election of the incumbent party (see Table 1). When five or fewer of these propositions are false or turned against the party holding the White House, that party wins another term in office. When six or more are false, the challenging party wins.

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. However, all judgment calls are made consistently across elections; the threshold standards established in the study of previous elections must be applied to future contests as well. The Keys were initially developed through the retrospective study of presidential elections from 1860 to 1980 and subsequently applied to predicting the results of elections from 1984 to 2008. See Table 2 for the call on each key for each of these 38 elections.

The Keys demonstrate that presidential elections are not decided by the economy alone. Instead, the Keys system provides a complete and balanced assessment of the many factors that determine the winners and losers of these quadrennial contests.

The Keys to the White House demonstrate that the American electorate chooses a president according to the performance of the party holding the White House as measured by the consequential events and episodes of a term—economic boom and bust, foreign policy successes and failures, social unrest, scandal, and policy innovation. Nothing that a candidate has said or done during a campaign, when the public discounts everything as political, has changed his prospects

**Table 1: 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.

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

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

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

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

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

**KEY 7 (Policy change):** The incumbent administration effects major changes in national policy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

Thus, it is governing, not campaigning, that counts in deciding presidential elections. No party has an enduring hold on the American presidency. Moreover, political leaders need not move to the ideological center. As demonstrated by presidents such as Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, a strong ideology can guide domestic and foreign policy initiatives that keep in line the keys needed to retain the White House. Given that campaigns don't decide elections, the Keys model also indicates that candidates should abandon conventional politics and develop the themes, issues and grassroots support needed for effective governance during the next four years.

The Keys give specificity to the theory that presidential election results turn primarily on the performance of the party controlling the White House and that politics as usual by the challenging candidate will have no impact on results. The Keys combine both quantitative and judgmental indicators. They include no polling data and consider a much wider range of performance indicators than economic concerns. Even with counting both economic keys



Los Angeles-area newspapers headline the death of Osama bin Laden, May 2, 2011. Major victories, such as the death of bin Laden, help secure the Foreign/Military Success Key 11 for Barack Obama.

AP Photo/Nick Ut

Table 2: Keys to the White House: Historical Results, 1860–2008

YEAR	K1	K2	K3	K4	K5	K6	K7	K8	K9	K10	K11	K12	K13	SUM	WIN
1860	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	7	N
1864	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	3	Y
1868	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	Y
1872	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	Y
1876	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	9	N*
1880	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	4	Y
1884	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	7	N
1888	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	5	Y*
1892	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	6	N
1896	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	8	N
1900	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	Y
1904	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Y
1908	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	Y
1912	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	6	N
1916	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	Y
1920	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	8	N
1924	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	4	Y
1928	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	Y
1932	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	8	N
1936	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	Y
1940	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	Y
1944	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	Y
1948	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	5	Y
1952	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	8	N
1956	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	Y
1960	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	9	N
1964	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	Y
1968	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	8	N
1972	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	4	Y
1976	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	8	N
1980	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	8	N
1984	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	Y
1988	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	Y
1992	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	6	N
1996	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	Y
2000	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	5	Y*
2004	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	4	Y
2008	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	9	N

An entry of 0 favors the party in power, while an entry of 1 indicates that a key is turned against the party in power, which favors the challenging party. The sum totals the keys against the party in power. Win indicates the popular vote outcome for the party in power.

\* The popular vote and the Electoral College vote diverged.



Job seekers line up to attend a job fair held by JobEXPO in New York, in this Jan. 25, 2012 photo. Although, the number of people seeking unemployment aid declined in early February, the weak economy during Obama's term has cost him Long-Term Economy Key 6.

AP Photo/  
Bebeto Matthews

against President Obama, he would still be predicted winner in November.

### The Verdict for 2012

Currently only three keys are called against the incumbent Democratic Party, three fewer than the six negative keys needed to predict the president's defeat (see Table 3).

The following nine keys favor the incumbent Democrats this year.

- President Barack Obama is unchallenged for re-nomination by Democratic Party, securing Contest Key 2.
- Obama's virtually certain nomination locks up Incumbency Key 3.
- The absence of any likely third-party challenger with chances of winning at least 5 percent of the vote gives the Democrats the Third-Party Key 4.
- The enactment of the health-care bill, perhaps the most significant social legislation since the mid-1960s, secures Policy Change Key 7.
- Even with the protests organized by Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements, the absence of

sustained, violent upheavals like those of the 1960s, avoids loss of the Social Unrest Key 8.

- Unlike the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, it is unlikely that the Solyndra affair or any other scandal will directly implicate the president in a significant way, averting the loss of Scandal Key 9.
- Despite the still unpopular war in Afghanistan, the president is not likely to suffer a major foreign policy or military failure, comparable to Pearl Harbor or losing the Vietnam War, keeping Foreign/Military Failure Key 10 in line.
- With the elimination of Osama Bin Laden and the liberation of Libya, the administration has secured major victories in foreign/military policy, winning Foreign/Military Success Key 11.
- No Republican challenger matches the charisma of Theodore Roosevelt or 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 midterm elections have cost it Mandate Key 1.
- The weak economy during Obama's term has forfeited Long-Term Economy Key 6.
- Obama has not regained the magic of his campaign, and now on a very cautious call falls short of gaining the Incumbent Charisma/Hero Key 12.

One key remains uncertain, although it is likely to hold true for the incumbent Democrats: Short-Term Economy Key 5. This key will fall only if there is a double-dip recession in 2012. Even the loss of this key, however, results in only four keys counted against Obama's reelection, still two keys short of predicting his defeat.

Beyond the possibility of an election-year recession, circumstances are unlikely to shift the verdict of the keys during the next 12 months. The Republicans will not likely find their Ronald Reagan of 2012 or discover a Watergate-type scandal to pin on President Obama. A major disaster abroad seems improbable, as does a significant third party campaign despite public dissatisfaction with both

Republicans and Democrats. The last third party candidate to topple Key 4 was billionaire Ross Perot in 1996. It is extremely difficult and expensive to mount a credible third party campaign in a presidential election. It is also possible that the incumbent charisma key could turn back in Obama's favor if he manages to recapture the magic of 2008.

### Lessons of the Keys

The keys that anticipate the outcome of the popular vote in every election since 1860 close the chasm opened by conventional political commentary between the selection of a president and the governing of the country. Horse-race commentary purports to tell us who is surging ahead or falling behind in a campaign. The record of the incumbent administration in governing America becomes little more than a backdrop for the real action of debates, speeches, ads, rallies, events, endorsements, and so on. The keys, however, show that effective governing, as measured by the consequential events of a presidential term, not packaging, image-making or campaigning keeps incumbent parties in office and renders futile conventional campaigning by challengers.

The lessons for the Republican nominee in 2012 are clear. A conventional, consultant-driven, riskless campaign will neither stave off defeat in November nor make any lasting contribution to American political life. Rather, the challenging candidate this year should run an unconventional, breakthrough campaign that presents a principled opposition to current policies, elevates the level of political debate, and inspires activism among voters. As John Kerry in 2004 and John McCain in 2008 both learned, the only thing worse than losing, is losing irrelevantly.

Barack Obama, who is favored by historical patterns, should focus on establishing a basis for governing over the next four years. He should present to the country a bold, substantive mes-

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

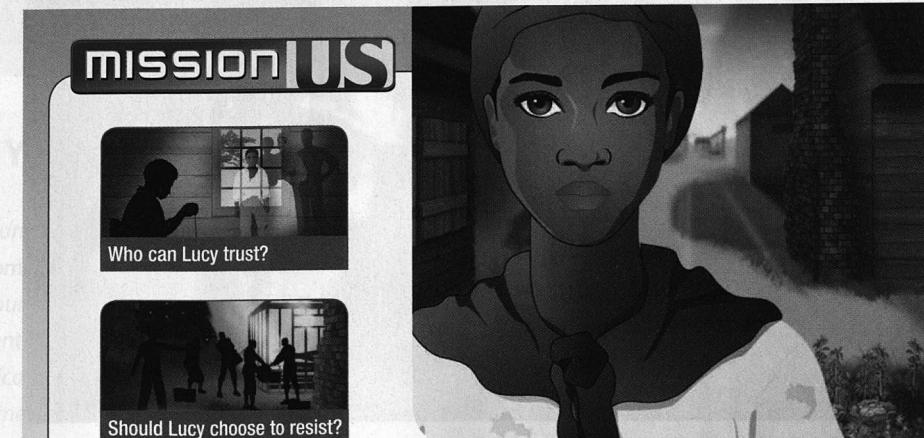
KEY NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	OUTCOME 2012
KEY 1	PARTY MANDATE	FALSE
KEY 2	CONTEST	TRUE
KEY 3	INCUMBENCY	TRUE
KEY 4	THIRD PARTY	TRUE
KEY 5	SHORT-TERM ECONOMY	LIKELY TRUE
KEY 6	LONG-TERM ECONOMY	FALSE
KEY 7	POLICY CHANGE	TRUE
KEY 8	SOCIAL UNREST	TRUE
KEY 9	SCANDAL	TRUE
KEY 10	FOREIGN/MILITARY FAILURE	TRUE
KEY 11	FOREIGN/MILITARY SUCCESS	TRUE
KEY 12	INCUMBENT CHARISMA	FALSE
KEY 13	CHALLENGER CHARISMA	TRUE

*True: 9 Keys; Likely True: 1 Key; False: 3 Keys; Prediction: Democrats Win Popular Vote in 2012*

sage that foreshadows his second term priorities. With a filibuster-proof Senate out of reach for Democrats, who also face uncertain prospects in their efforts to regain control of the House, Obama will

need the strongest mandate possible to govern effectively in a second term. ☀

**ALLAN J. LICHTMAN** is Distinguished Professor of History at American University. His latest book is *The Keys to the White House, 2012 Edition*.



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