

# The Keys to the White House: Prediction for 2008

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## Political Change in America

The winds of political change are blowing through America in 2008 and will sweep the party in power from the White House next November. That is the verdict of 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. I have been sharing with readers of *Social Education* predictions of presidential election results, based on the Keys, since Bill Clinton faced off against Bob Dole in 1996.

The Keys model accounts for the popular vote winner of every American presidential election since 1860 (see Table 1). It has correctly forecast in advance the popular vote winner of all six presidential elections from 1984 to 2004, usually months or even years prior to Election Day. In 2004, for example, the Keys forecast George W. Bush's re-election in April 2003, nearly a year before any other academic model. The Keys to the White House, as of the beginning of January 2008, indicate that Democrats will win the popular vote in 2008, regardless of the identity of their party's nominee.

## The Keys Model

The Keys to the White House show that a pragmatic 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 candi-

date 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 Keys give specificity to this performance model of presidential elections through 13 diagnostic questions that are stated as propositions that favor re-election of the incumbent party (see Table 2). 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.

Unlike many alternative models, the Keys include no polling data, but are based on the big picture of how well the party in power and the country are faring prior to an upcoming election. In addition, the Keys do 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 incumbent party, all aspects of which are reflected in one or more keys. Even without counting a single economic key against the incumbent Republicans, they would still be predicted losers in 2008.

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 2004.

## The Verdict for 2008

At the time of this writing in November 2007, eight keys were called against the incumbent Republican Party, two more than necessary to predict its defeat on Election Day 2008 (see Table 3).

The following eight keys fall against the incumbent party:

- The Democrats won more than enough U.S. House seats in the 2006 midterm elections to topple Key 1 (party mandate).

- The Republicans are battling fiercely in choosing a nominee to replace George W. Bush, turning Key 2 (contest) against them.
- Bush's inability to run again in 2008 dooms Key 3 (incumbency).
- Real per-capita growth so far during the second Bush administration is slightly below the record achieved during the last two presidential terms, so Key 6 (long-term economy) is counted against the party in power.
- With bitter partisan divisions in Congress, Bush has failed to achieve the second-term policy revolution needed to secure Key 7 (policy change).
- The war in Iraq is a broadly acknowledged failure and the administration has achieved no offsetting triumph in foreign/military affairs, forfeiting Key 10 (foreign/military failure) and Key 11 (foreign/military success).
- Of all GOP candidates on the horizon, none appears to be a Theodore Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan, toppling Key 12 (incumbent charisma).
- 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).
- No prospective Democratic challenger thus far matches the charisma of Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy, keeping Key 13 (challenger charisma) in line for the incumbents.

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 three of the political keys. Setbacks in foreign policy account for the shift of another key 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.

Although keys do not usually change late in a presidential term, shifting verdicts are at least theoretically possible. For example, one of the Republican candidates could sweep to an overwhelmingly victory in the party primaries. However, a changed forecast for 2008 requires three of eight negative keys to turn back in favor of the Republicans, with none shifting to the challenging party. Barack Obama conceivably could emerge as a charismatic challenging candidate; Bloomberg could still launch a third-party campaign; the economy could fall into recession during the election year; and the Democratic Congress could uncover a scandal to pin on the president, not just subordinates. It is also possible, although unlikely, that the nomination of a breakthrough candidate such as a woman (Hillary Clinton) or an African American (Barack Obama) could break the historical pattern of election results.

The Keys to the White House firmly predict a Democratic victory in the popular vote in 2008. It is most improbable that the course of events will swing the Keys back in line for the GOP.

### **A New Kind of Campaign**

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. Effective governing keeps incumbent parties in office and renders futile conventional campaigning by challengers. This relationship between governing and politics has held true across nearly 150 years of American history and vast changes in our economy, society, and politics: suffrage for women and blacks; new immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America; the rise of the corporation; and the advent of polling, television, and the Internet.

It also follows that a candidate disadvantaged by the lineup of the Keys has an incentive to break the pattern of history by waging an unconventional, breakthrough campaign. In 2004, the Democrats' failure to understand that the historical odds favored Republicans led John Kerry to run a visionless, consultant-driven general election campaign that failed to establish a principled opposition, elevate the level of political debate, and inspire activism at the grass roots. In July 2004, Keilis-Borok and I wrote:

Kerry has a choice between following the usual meaningless routine in the hope that setbacks to the administration and the country will elect him in November or take a chance on running a new kind of daring, innovative, and programmatic campaign. With the right choice, Kerry can achieve an historical breakthrough that would establish the basis for a principled choice of our national leader and a grassroots mobilization on issues that matter to America's future.<sup>1</sup>

The following five keys favor the incumbent Republican Party:

- Given that New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg—the only third-party contender likely to win at least 5 percent of the popular vote—has repeatedly said that he will not run for president, Key 4 (third party) falls in favor of the party in power.
- The economy is not in recession, and if this situation continues in 2008, Key 5 (short-term economy) should fall in line for the GOP.

Table 1. **Keys to the White House: Historical Results, 1860–2004**

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	Y
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

An entry of 1 favors the challenging party and of 0 favors the party in power. The sum totals the keys against the party in power. Win indicates the popular vote outcome for the party in power (Y=wins popular vote, N=loses). \*The popular vote and the Electoral College vote diverged.

Table 2: **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.

\* 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.

In politics, as Kerry learned, the only thing worse than losing, is losing irrelevantly.

Candidates favored by the Keys do not have an incentive to break historical patterns in their campaign. However, they do have an incentive, within the limits of conventional politics, to build a foundation for governing over the next four years. A predicted winner, for example, should campaign more like Ronald Reagan in 1980 than George H. W. Bush in 1988. In 1980, Reagan presented a bold conservative message that established a foundation for major policy change during his term. He pledged to get government out of people’s pockets and off their backs by cutting taxes, domestic spending, and burdensome regulations. He promised to uphold “traditional values” and let America “stand tall” again in the world by strengthening defense, confronting the Reds, and putting third-world upstarts in their place. In contrast, Bush campaigned in 1988 on mostly what he was against, not for, and lacked a mandate for governing after Reagan.

In sum, if candidates understood how elections really worked they would avoid the kind of empty, scripted, and consultant-driven campaigns that the American people endured in 2004.

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

KEY NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	OUTCOME 2008
KEY 1	PARTY MANDATE	FALSE
KEY 2	CONTEST	FALSE
KEY 3	INCUMBENCY	FALSE
KEY 4	THIRD PARTY	TRUE
KEY 5	SHORT-TERM ECONOMY	TRUE
KEY 6	LONG-TERM ECONOMY	FALSE
KEY 7	POLICY CHANGE	FALSE
KEY 8	SOCIAL UNREST	TRUE
KEY 9	SCANDAL	TRUE
KEY 10	FOREIGN/MILITARY FAILURE	FALSE
KEY 11	FOREIGN/MILITARY SUCCESS	FALSE
KEY 12	INCUMBENT CHARISMA	FALSE
KEY 13	CHALLENGER CHARISMA	TRUE

*True: 5 Keys; False: 8 Keys; Prediction: Incumbent Republicans Lose*

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. 🗳️

**Note:**

1. A. J. Lichtman and V.I. Keilis-Borok, “What Kerry Must Do to Win (But Probably Won’t),” *Counterpunch* V, no. 1 (July 2004), [www.counterpunch.org/lichtman07292004.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/lichtman07292004.html).

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