The Keys to the White House: A Preliminary Forecast for 2012

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ABSTRACT

The Keys to the White House are an index-based prediction system that retrospectively account for the popular-vote winners of every US presidential election from 1860 to 1980 and prospectively forecast the winners of every presidential election from 1984 through 2008. The Keys demonstrate that American presidential elections do not turn on events of the campaign, but rather on the performance of the party controlling the White House. The Keys hold important lessons for politics in the United States and worldwide. A preliminary forecast based on the Keys indicates that President Obama is a likely winner in 2012, but also reveals the specific problems at home and abroad that could thwart his re-election.

Keywords: Keys to the White House, Barack Obama, Prediction, Presidential Elections

THE KEYS TO THE WHITE HOUSE

Every four years the media worldwide spends more than a billion dollars covering the American presidential campaign. In the general election campaign, every gesture, word, and deed of the Republican and Democratic candidates is scrutinized for its purported effect on the outcome of the fall election. As in a horserace, candidates are viewed as spurting ahead or slipping behind day by day, with the superior campaigner ultimately triumphing at the polls. The only problem with this “horserace” model that dominates the coverage of presidential elections is that it is false and misleading.

The historical record of presidential elections shows that a pragmatic electorate chooses a president, not according to events on the campaign trail, but 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. This new vision of American politics is based on The Keys to the White House, a prediction system based on the study of every presidential election from 1860 to 2008. I first developed the Keys system in 1981, in collaboration with Vladimir Keilis-Borok, founder of the International Institute of Earthquake Prediction Theory and Mathematical Geophysics. Retrospectively, the keys model accounts for the popular vote winner of every American presidential election since 1860, much longer than any other prediction system. Prospectively, the Keys to the White House has correctly forecast the popular vote winner of all seven presidential elections from 1984 to 2008, usually months or even years

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prior to Election Day. For example, the keys called Vice President George H. W. Bush’s victory in the spring of 1988 when he trailed Mike Dukakis by double-digits in the polls and was being written off by the pollsters and the pundits (Lichtman, 1988, May). The Keys forecast George W. Bush’s 2004 re-election in April 2003, nearly a year before any other academic model (Jones, 2007). In February 2006, more than two and a half years ahead of time, the Keys predicted that the Democrats would recapture the White House in the 2008 election (Lichtman, 2006, 5).

As indicated in Table 1, each of the thirteen keys is stated as a threshold condition that always favors the re-election of the party holding the White House. For example, Key 5 is phrased as “The economy is not in recession during the election campaign.” Each key can then be assessed as true or false prior to an upcoming election and the winner predicted according to a simple decision rule. When five or fewer keys are false, the incumbent party wins; when any six or more are false, the challenging party wins.

This system also provides insight into party prospects for the 2012 election at a time when all other forecasting methods are about as reliable as the flipping of coins. The system shows that it is possible to predict well ahead of time the outcomes of presidential elections from indicators that primarily track the performance and strength of the party holding the White House.

**LESSONS OF THE KEYS**

The Keys have several important implications for our understanding of American history, politics, and public policy. First, the keys demonstrate that American presidential elections have followed a common enduring logic since Republican Abraham Lincoln defeated Democrat Stephen Douglas in 1860. The pragmatic basis by which the American electorate chooses a president has remained stable in 150 years despite vast changes in the American economy and society, the composition of the electorate, and the technology of campaigns. This insight

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**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. |
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