

The Keys to Election 2004

Thirteen diagnostic questions prove to be a surprisingly accurate barometer for presidential elections —
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Despite a record number of Democrats seeking the presidential nomination, their prize will not be worth much unless the now sizzling economy fizzles in the next few months. Even then George W. Bush may well win election to a second term in office. This good news for President Bush and grim news for Democrats comes from the Keys to the White House, a prediction system based on the analysis of every American presidential election since 1860. The Keys first predicted a Bush victory on 24 April 2003 in the column I regularly write for the *Montgomery Gazette* newspaper. That prediction still stands today.

I developed the Keys system in 1981, in collaboration with Volodia Keilis-Borok, a world-renowned authority on the mathematics of prediction models. History shows that the choice of a president does not turn on debates, advertising, speeches, endorsements, rallies, platforms, promises, or campaign tactics. Rather, presidential elections are primarily referenda on how well the party holding the White House has governed during its term. The Keys give specificity to this idea of how presidential elections work, assessing the performance, strength, and unity of the party holding the White House to determine whether or not it has crossed the threshold that separates victory from defeat. (See Table 1, "Keys to the White House")

Retrospectively, the Keys accurately account for the results of every presidential election from 1860 through 1980, much longer than any other prediction system. Prospectively, the Keys predicted well ahead of time the popular-vote winners of every presidential election from 1984 through 2000. (See Table 2, "How the Thirteen Keys Turned") As a nationally-based system the Keys cannot diagnose the results in individual states and thus are more attuned to the popular vote than the Electoral College results. The 2000 election, however, was the first time since 1888 that the popular vote verdict diverged from the Electoral College results. And the Keys still got the popular vote right in 2000, just as they did in 1888 when Democrat Grover Cleveland won the national tally but lost in the Electoral College to Republican Benjamin Harrison and in 1876 when Democrat Samuel Tilden

won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College vote to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes.

No such divergence, moreover, would have occurred in the 2000 election except that ballots cast by African American voters in Florida were discarded as invalid at much higher rates than ballots cast by white voters. As demonstrated in a study I prepared for the United States Commission on Civil Rights, if the rejection rate in Florida for ballots cast by blacks had been equivalent to the rate for whites, more than 50,000 additional ballots cast by blacks would have been counted in the election. Surveys of black voting show that the overwhelming majority of these ballots would have been cast for Al Gore.

The Keys are 13 diagnostic questions that are stated as propositions that favor reelection of the incumbent party. 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. The keys indicate incumbent party success or failure long before the polls or any other forecasting models are of any value.

The Keys differ from other prediction models in significant ways. Unlike many models developed by political scientists, 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 incumbent parties. The most renowned economic-based model—developed by Professor Ray Fair of Yale University—missed the outcome in 1976 because it ignored Watergate and the collapse of Vietnam. Fair's model was inconclusive in 1980 because his equations neglected the Iran hostage crisis and President Carter's stalled domestic agenda. In 1992, the model again missed the election because it didn't consider President George H. W. Bush's

Table 1

The 13 Keys to the White House: Current Standings

The Keys are statements that favor the reelection of the incumbent party. When five or fewer statements are false, the incumbent party wins. When six or more are false, the challenging party wins.

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.	TRUE
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.	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.	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: 9 KEYS FALSE: 4 KEYS INCUMBENT WINS

failed leadership, his lack of a record of policy change, and the advent of the Perot campaign.

According to the Keys, the incumbent Republicans are currently well positioned to regain the White House in 2004, despite the sour economy for much of the Bush term. The party in power now has four keys turned against it for 2004, two short of the fatal six negative keys. Thus President Bush could endure one more major setback between now and November and still win reelection.

The following nine keys currently favor the incumbent Republican Party.

- ➔ By gaining seats in the U.S. House elections of 2002, Republicans locked in the party mandate key.
- ➔ The lack of any prospective nomination challenge to President George Bush gives the Republicans the incumbent party contest key.
- ➔ Likewise, Bush's near certain nomination secures the incumbency key.
- ➔ The absence of any likely third-party challenger with prospects of winning 5 percent of the vote or more gives Republicans the third-party key.
- ➔ The recovering economy secures the short-term economy key, unless there is a return of the recession in 2004.
- ➔ Despite anti-war protests, the absence of sustained, violent upheavals like those of the 1960s, avoids loss of the social unrest key.
- ➔ The president's response to the September 11 attack including the expulsion of the Taliban from Afghanistan and the capture of Saddam Hussein secures the foreign/military success key, unless the United States suffers major reversals in both Iraq and Afghanistan in 2004.
- ➔ The lack of a significant scandal implicating the president averts loss of the scandal key.
- ➔ No Democratic challenger matches the charisma of Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy, keeping Republicans from losing the challenger charisma/hero key.

The following four keys fall against the Republicans.

- ➔ The weak economy during the Bush

Table 2

How the 13 Keys Turned: Chronological Record, 1860-2000

✓ = true ✗ = false

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total*
1860	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	7
1864	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	3
1868	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2
1872	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3
1876	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	9**
1880	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	4
1884	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	7
1888	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	5**
1892	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	6
1896	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	8
1900	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	3
1904	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	0
1908	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	3
1912	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	6
1916	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	3
1920	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	8
1924	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	4
1928	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	3
1932	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	8
1936	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	1
1940	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	2
1944	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	2
1948	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	5
1952	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	8
1956	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1
1960	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	9
1964	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	3
1968	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	8
1972	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	4
1976	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	8
1980	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	8
1984	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	2
1988	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	3
1992	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	6
1996	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	5
2000	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	5**

* i.e., total against the candidate of the incumbent party.

** Electoral vote did not coincide with popular vote results.

term as compared to the boom years of Clinton's two terms costs the Republicans the long-term economy key.

- ➡ The relatively modest domestic accomplishments of the Bush administration topple the policy-change key.
- ➡ The first successful foreign attack on the continental United States since the war of 1812 costs the party in power the foreign/military failure key.
- ➡ George Bush does not measure up to the charisma of Theodore Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan, forfeiting the incumbent charisma/hero key.

Keys, of course, could still change between now and November. Be forewarned, however, that late-changing keys have not affected the outcome of a presidential election since September and October of 1864 when General Sherman's taking of Atlanta, General Sheridan's victories in Virginia, and the sinking of the last Confederate ramming vessel turned the foreign/military key in favor of the Lincoln administration and averted loss of the third party key. Still, beyond the possibility of reversals in Afghanistan and Iraq, keep your eye on the following keys. The economy is always unpredictable and a sudden negative turn during the election year, if highly unlikely, is not impossible. The scandal key is faintly in play as the administration still has not accounted for the disclosure of the identity of CIA agent Valerie Plame, wife of former ambassador Joseph Wilson, whose on-site investigations cast doubt on claims

that Iraq was purchasing uranium in Africa. Even after the appointment of a special counsel—Patrick J. Fitzgerald, the U.S. Attorney in Chicago—it is unlikely that the on-going inquiry would directly implicate the president in the scandal, a necessary condition for turning the scandal key against the administration. The report of the commission investigating the September 11 terrorist attacks, which will be released before the November election, might also affect the scandal key. Thomas Kean, chair of the commission, has said that the attacks were preventable, although he has so far declined to point fingers of blame at any officials in the Bush administration.

Even the improbable loss of one of these two keys, however, would produce five discrepant keys, still leaving the Bush administration one key short of defeat. To predict the Republican's defeat, either both the short-term economy key and the scandal key would have to fall or the toppling of one of these keys would have to reverse the verdict on another key, creating perhaps a challenge to Bush's nomination or a significant third-party movement. Thus at the very start of 2004, the scenarios needed to predict the president's defeat seem extremely remote. 🗳️

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