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In the Quake Model, Rumbings Favor Obama

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Monday, August 25, 2008; A03

More than a quarter-century ago, a historian with an interest in American politics was at a dinner party at the [California Institute of Technology](#) and found himself seated next to a Soviet geophysicist and mathematician who studied earthquake prediction.

Before the evening was out, Allan Lichtman, the historian, and Vladimir Keilis-Borok, the geophysicist, started on a collaboration that would eventually draw the attention of presidents and politicians who would be president. The two researchers figured out that the science of forecasting earthquakes offered an important insight into presidential elections.

While people who study elections usually scrutinize individual voters, politicians, advocacy groups, issues, campaign contributors and volunteers, Keilis-Borok and Lichtman decided to think about an election the same way geophysicists regard earthquakes. Getting too close to the phenomenon -- the views of individual voters and campaigners -- is like trying to study an earthquake by analyzing every single molecule of rock and soil.

"The systems that generate elections and earthquakes are complex systems," said Keilis-Borok, who is now a professor of earth sciences at the [University of California at Los Angeles](#). "They are not predictable by simple equations, but after coarse-graining -- averaging -- they become predictable."

Lichtman and Keilis-Borok analyzed every presidential election between 1860 and 1980. Rather than study how politicians waged campaigns, and what the specific issues were in each election, the researchers stepped back to look for general markers, such as whether the party incumbent in the [White House](#) had gained or lost seats in the previous midterm election, and whether the incumbent party had achieved a monumental policy victory.

"We reconceptualized presidential politics in geophysical terms," said Lichtman, who teaches at [American University](#). "We didn't look at it as Reagan versus Carter or Republicans versus Democrats or liberals versus conservatives. Rather, we looked at elections as stability versus upheavals."

Stability, according to their definition, is when the party that is incumbent in the White House -- in this case, the Republican Party -- wins the next presidential election. Upheavals are when the opposition party wins elections.

The researchers found that four markers or "keys" correctly predicted every presidential election over 120 years. These keys were whether the incumbent party's candidate won the presidential nomination on the first ballot with at least two-thirds of the delegate count, the absence of a third-party candidate who won 5 percent or more of the overall vote, the absence of a recession, and the presence of a major policy victory in the previous term. (See keys 2, 4, 5 and 7 in the accompanying graphic.)

Given that they wanted to play it safe, Keilis-Borok and Lichtman selected nine other keys that increased the confidence with which they could have predicted all the elections between 1860 and 1980.

Since they devised the system in 1981, Lichtman said, the duo have published predictions for six presidential elections, and the system has correctly predicted every winner of the popular vote. (Because

the keys are based on questions of national mood and import, Lichtman said, he cannot predict the outcome of the electoral college. In 2000, Lichtman predicted [Al Gore](#) would win. Gore did win the popular vote, but he lost in the electoral college after the Supreme Court declared [George W. Bush](#) the winner of the disputed Florida vote count.)

The intriguing thing about the keys is that they seem to portend the direction of a presidential election well before the campaign begins. In 1991, for example, at the height of [George H.W. Bush](#)'s popularity, Lichtman predicted the White House would change hands in 1992 -- he even fielded a call about this from the office of an obscure Arkansas governor named [Bill Clinton](#), who wanted to know whether Bush could be beaten.

In 1983, Lichtman was summoned to the White House and asked by Lee Atwater, President [Ronald Reagan](#)'s political director, whether the Republicans could keep the White House if they ran a candidate other than Reagan. Lichtman told Atwater they would win in 1984 with Reagan but lose without him -- an incumbent president running for reelection and a charismatic candidate are two keys.

In 2004, as many Democrats told themselves that there was no way [Sen. John F. Kerry](#) could lose to George W. Bush, Lichtman said his keys foretold a Republican victory.

In a paper in the International Journal of Forecasting, Lichtman predicted a political earthquake this November: The incumbent party will crumble, and [Sen. Barack Obama](#) will be elected president.

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