CHAPTER 5: WHAT DOESN'T WIN THE PRESIDENCY

We come now to my favorite year.

As 1988 approached, I was not convinced about this Lichtman stuff. Intrigued, to be sure, because of the remarkable and singular success of his predictions in 1986. I sought Lichtman out for an interview. I wrote about his system several times between 1986 and 1988. At first I wrote very positively, as I began the process of reevaluating my own embarrassingly conventional understanding of politics. But as the 1988 election approached, Lichtman seemed quite clearly to be going wrong.

It turned out that he had a system for predicting the outcomes of presidential elections, too. He had first deployed it in the 1984 election. Of course, I wasn't much impressed that he predicted the re-election of Ronald Reagan, because everybody had made that prediction. Reagan coasted to a 49-state win over Walter Mondale. A good deal more interesting, admittedly, was the timing of Lichtman's forecast. He had written in the April, 1982 edition of *Washingtonian* magazine a piece called "How to bet in '84." He said that Reagan looked strong.

The piece was written during a bad time for Reagan. Upon the passage of Reagan's tax cut plan in 1981, the country had plunged into the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. By '82, the Republican Party was divided over...
whether to go back and raise taxes, what with the deficit soaring. Most Democrats (a category into which Lichtman fits) were in an I-told-you-so mode about Reagan, convinced that his ideological delusions were producing catastrophe for the nation. The mid-term congressional election would see the Democrats gain 26 House seats (and one in the Senate).

One of the central notions of conventional analysis of American politics is the old "peace and prosperity" theory. By this theory, an incumbent president who runs during peace and prosperity is thought to be all but unbeatable, but a bad economy is held to be big trouble.

Yet here was Lichtman making his hedged prediction of Reagan strength at the depths of an unusually bad recession.

Of course, peace and prosperity did turn out to prevail in 1984. That obviously mattered in the outcome. But another factor often cited for Reagan's landslide was Democratic nominee Walter Mondale's allegedly excessive liberalism, combined with his overt ties to Democratic interest groups. Indeed, the Democratic Party itself seemed to eventually accept this analysis. By 1988, the party was trying to appear more conservative. The candidates that year generally avoided high-profile ties to labor, feminists, environmentalists and Jewish groups. Michael Dukakis -- associated with welfare reform and with making the Massachusetts economy work in the wake of its reputation as
Taxachusetts -- ran saying that the issue in the campaign was not ideology, but "competence." And, whereas Mondale had picked New York liberal, and woman, Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate, Dukakis picked Texas white guy, non-liberal Lloyd Bentsen.

What was interesting about Lichtman's article in 1982 was, among other things, that it came before Mondale was nominated. At that time, Mondale was the front-runner, but John Glenn -- a national hero with a more moderate image -- was seen as a real possibility for the Democratic nomination. Also, Lichtman was not making any assumption that Mondale would take his eventual placate-the-interest-groups path to the nomination. Lichtman wasn't making any assumptions one way or the other about who the Democrats would pick or how they would campaign. And yet he was almost ready to call it for Reagan at the height of Reagan's difficulties.

Hmmm.


I'm not sure I can capture here just how out of line that prediction was with what everybody else was saying and thinking from the fall of 1987 through the winter and spring of 1988. Dukakis led in the early polls consistently,
sometimes hugely, by 12 to 18 points. The Gallup Poll had him ahead by 16 when the Lichtman prediction came out.

People in the political community often give lip service to the notion that early polls don't mean much. But nobody really means it. If the polls are consistent enough and the margin big enough, people start to see meaning. In this case, the fact that Vice President George Bush was a well-known commodity helped foster the belief that the poll numbers had meaning. He'd been vice president for eight years and had been fairly well known even before that. Apparently the voters had formed their (negative) judgments of him, or so the analysts seemed to think. What could change those judgments at this stage was hard to see.

(This situation was duplicated eerily in late 1999 and early 2000, in an election involving another vice president and another Bush. But the Bush was in a different role. This time George W. Bush -- the governor of Texas who, before the campaign, was as unknown to the general public as Dukakis had been as governor of Massachusetts -- was in the role that Dukakis had in 1988. Bush the younger was consistently running ahead of Vice President Al Gore in the polls. This caused a spate of articles to be written about Gore's limitations as a politician and a spate of questions about whether Gore should be the Democratic nominee. After all, the voters knew him pretty well, and their opinion of him seemed pretty clear.)
In late 1987 and early 1988, the poll-driven political and journalistic communities bent themselves to the task of explaining what was wrong with Vice President George Bush and the Republicans. Newsweek had a poll-driven cover story on Oct. 16 about "The Wimp Factor," a popular buzz phrase in Washington. George H.W. Bush just didn't seem to people like a president; he seemed, in fact, like he was born to be vice president. Everybody was doing that story.

Most commentators took to the task not so much of predicting a Dukakis victory (which is a bigger risk than most want to take), but of explaining it.

Fred Barnes, the knowledgeable conservative writer, was one of the few who had the courage to actually make the prediction. He did a piece in the Feb. 29, 1988 issue of The New Republic magazine labeled, "A Donkey's Year: All the Signs Point to a Democratic Victory in November." He said, "I'd bet on Gephardt or Michael Dukakis or Albert Gore as probable winners over either of the Republican leaders, George Bush or Bob Dole." He cited liberal writer William Greider of the Rolling Stone as agreeing with him, and he quoted several leading Republicans expressing pessimism, if not making outright predictions. Barnes' theory -- his explanation for Bush's defeat -- was that people get tired of having the same party in power and that, although the Republicans had been successful in improving the national
economy, the polls showed that people just didn't perceive the success.

In the spring of 1988, I wrote an argument similar to the one Barnes was making. I lectured Lichtman to the effect that -- while his approach showed promise -- he had left one historical pattern out of his system (a system that was based upon historical patterns). The missing pattern: No party had won the presidency three terms in a row since a constitutional amendment was passed after the Franklin Roosevelt years saying that no person could have the presidency three terms in a row.

I did believe that the good economy in 1988 would help the Republicans. I found Barnes' belief that it wouldn't amazing. I just didn't think it'd be enough.

I wrote, "Bush's big problem is that he's a Republican at the wrong point in the cycle. The rest is mostly noise."

That analysis was not only wrong but wrongheaded. It held that the voters who determine the outcomes of our elections are next to mindless -- that they go back and forth between the parties on some sort of schedule -- which itself is next to mindless.

That I could be so wrong was particularly remarkable given my recent exposure to enlightenment in the form of Lichtman's predictions about 1984 and 1986.
But poll addiction is a very tough addiction to get under control. Like the other pundits, I wasn't predicting. I was explaining. The polls showed a Dukakis victory, so a Dukakis victory had to be explained.

(Some people made even less sense than I. One local pundit, puzzling over the polls, actually argued that the GOP problem was that times were too good. He said the economy was so dynamic that it was causing disruption in people's lives. They found themselves moving to new locations and into new businesses to cash in. That caused them as many problems as it solved. And they blamed the incumbents for the problems.)

By the summer, expectations of a Dukakis victory had become so general that there was no point in making the prediction. The journalists settled for reporting the polls and reporting on what was wrong with Republicans. In conversation, you'd find plenty of people who thought the election would be close -- closer than the polls suggested. In fact, most people seemed to think that. But nobody seemed to think Bush would win. And certainly nobody thought he would win easily.

He won easily. He came out of the national conventions ahead, and his lead grew from there.
So what did Lichtman see in the spring that the polls and poll-driven analysts (meaning all the media analysts) did not see?

Lichtman takes more pride in his presidential system than his senatorial system. He says that, applied retroactively, his presidential keys accurately predict the outcome of the popular vote in every election back through 1860, which is to say, really, every election in what might be called the Democratic-Republican era. (The Republicans came into being just before the Civil War.) Moreover -- and more than in the Senate schemes -- the retro-active "predictions" can generally made with room to spare, so that if there's disagreement about how to turn one or two keys, the prediction stands either way.

In the previous chapter, we saw how the stability of the American two-party system facilitated the development of a system of prediction in Senate elections that is based upon historical precedents. This applies in the presidential realm, too. In many ways, an election in the 1980s looked like an election in the 1880s: the same two parties contesting each other at the same intervals, mostly in the same places.

The presidential prediction scheme has 13 keys. As in the case of the eight Senate keys, there's nothing magic about the number. That's just how many Lichtman found he had to combine to come up with a system that gets every past
presidential election right, and does so with room to spare. As a general rule.

He found that the incumbent party has always won the popular vote when no more than five of the 13 keys are turned against it. Again, there's nothing magic about this number. It's just the pattern that developed.

The keys do not predict the electoral college vote. (In the electoral college -- the official determinant of who takes office -- all the votes from any state are officially cast in favor of the candidate who won the popular plurality in that state, even if that plurality was teensy.) This very seldom matters. By 2000, the electoral college and the popular vote hadn't gone in different directions in 112 years.

In the modern era, the electoral college outcome actually tends to magnify any margin the popular-vote winner has. The elections of 1960, 1968 and 1976 were paper thin in the popular vote, but not in the electoral college. The medium-sized Clinton victories of the 1990s were 2-1 blowouts in the electoral college. This is because, contrary to what one often hears from political analysts who are pretending they know something that the general public doesn't, a presidential election is not 50 different elections, but one great big one. Trends prevail across much of the country. Many narrow wins in individual states add up to a big win in the electoral college.
There are exceptions, obviously. And Lichtman does not have a scheme that is correct for every election since the Civil War era at predicting electoral college outcomes.

The system he did come up with is about how *people* vote. The fact that, once a century, an odd mechanism gets in between the way the people vote and the way an election is decided is not something that such a system can reasonably be expected to deal with.

Below are the keys, along with some commentary (mine, not Lichtman's), and, at the end of each section, a word about how the key was turned in 1988.

As you will see, five of the keys can be said to be about how the country is doing in the election year. A few others are about how the administration and its political party have been faring politically in recent years.

Again, as in the Senate case, none has to do with campaign strategy or the quality of a candidate's campaign organization or the nature of the ad campaigns; none has to do with ideology or the positions a candidate takes on the issues. Almost absent is the matter of a candidate's personality and style. No key mentions "peace" -- as in the old "peace and prosperity" theory of what brings incumbent victory. And almost all of the keys can almost always be authoritatively turned -- decided -- before the campaign actually happens, though not necessarily before the election year.
The keys are phrased as true-false questions, wherein a true favors the incumbent party. Six or more falses, and the incumbent loses.

**Key 1 (Party mandate):** *After the last mid-term elections, the incumbent party holds more seats in the U.S. House of Representatives than it did after the previous mid-term elections.*

This is one of the most complicated keys to state, but the concept is simple: Either a party is on the upswing over the last two elections or it isn't.

Note that the question is not which party actually controls the House. None of the keys attempts to ascertain which party is the majority party in the country, by any definition. In that sense, the Lichtman scheme is a challenge to a view that's widely held among both scholars and political types: that there are Democratic and Republican eras.

Under the "eras" view, the Republicans were the majority party from late 19th century to the New Deal, and then again after 1968; the GOP dominated the presidency in those years, and the Democrats in between. This view proceeds from the premise that there must be some reason that one party dominates the presidency during any given era.
Surely, the notion goes, if the only Republican the Democrats lost to between 1932 and 1968 was a great war hero of no particular ideological bent (Dwight Eisenhower), that's another way of saying the Democrats were the majority party. And, surely, if between 1968 and 1992, the only time the Democrats won the presidency was immediately after Watergate, and if their president, Jimmy Carter (also somewhat indistinct ideologically) was unable to win re-election, that tells us that we are talking about an era when the Republicans had a working majority in the presidential electorate.

And surely that suggests that, just as the Republicans were too conservative before 1968, the Democrats were too liberal after.

The Lichtman keys, however, say that both parties are perpetually only one election away from the presidency, depending upon very short-term developments, and that a huge factor in determining which party wins the presidency is how the country is doing during the election year.

This isn't necessarily a complete contradiction of the party-dominance theory. If one party is having difficulty holding the presidency during a given era, that may be because life is more difficult for presidents of the lesser party. That fact can result in election-year circumstances (specified below) that favor the other party.
Still, Lichtman is not saying that party strength is irrelevant, just that the way to look at it is to get a feel for the direction it's going. The first key, standing alone, accurately predicts the outcome of two-thirds of the presidential elections in the last century and a half. That is, if the party with the presidency has gained recently in the House, it has a two-thirds chance of victory in the next presidential election, and if it hasn't it's probably going to lose.

In 1988, the key got a true answer, working for Bush. The GOP had gained 17 House seats in the Reagan landslide of 1984 and lost only 5 in 1986.

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

This is the best single predictor of all the keys. By itself, it calls 32 of the past 36 elections. That is, if the incumbent party is pretty much united all along, it wins; if not, it loses, with a few exceptions.

Look at contemporary history: The only three times the incumbent party has been sharply divided at its convention (which is the measure Lichtman uses, rather than votes in primaries), have been 1968, when the Democratic convention city was literally bloody; 1976 when Ronald Reagan was still angling for the nomination at the Republican convention (after a long see-saw primary season against President Gerald Ford); and 1980, when Sen. Ted Kennedy challenged
President Jimmy Carter in the primaries then famously failed to shake his hand when they stood together before the convention. Each time, the incumbent party lost.

The most common explanation one hears for this phenomenon is that divisions leave wounds that don't heal by election time, and that some of a party's usual supporters "take a walk," either in the form of not voting, or in the form of not helping in the campaign, or not helping soon enough. This explanation is dubious. The people who feel so passionately about politics as to be furious about a nomination are few in number and are almost certain to vote -- for their party. Whether they actually help out in a campaign or contribute financially is probably not terribly important. The same divisions that cause some to sit back cause others to get all the more involved.

Most likely, one reason the second key is so powerful is that internal party divisions reflect widespread public doubts about the performance of the incumbent party. If a presidency is going well -- as measured mainly by the country doing well -- the party with the presidency is likely to be fairly united behind either the president or the heir apparent.

Another reason the second key is so powerful: Look at the voters who go back and forth between the two parties not only between elections but between various contests on the
same ballot. These voters -- almost by definition -- are not motivated by the ideological disputes that divide the parties. If they preferred one party's world view, they would not be regular swing voters. What the second key suggests is that when these voters see that the case against the incumbent party is made not only by the opposition party, but by many members of the incumbent party, their doubts about the incumbent party increase.

So internal party division not only reflects, but magnifies, public doubts about the incumbents.

In 1988, this key got a true response, reflecting well on Bush's chances in the general election. Though a large field entered the early GOP primaries, he locked up the nomination early, and nobody fought him at the convention.

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

Being president is, unmistakably, a credential for being president. This key alone predicts the outcome of more than two-thirds of all presidential elections. Just as in the case of Senate elections, the pattern is not only that the incumbent party tends to win when the incumbent runs; it's that the party tends to lose when he doesn't. As of 1988, the incumbent party had lost three times in the modern era when it had not put up the incumbent president: 1952, 1960 and 1968.
The keys suggest that if a party has a presidency that is not exactly working out -- Jimmy Carter's or George H.W. Bush's -- the party's best political bet is to stick with it. That way the candidate at least wins this key. If the party tries to dump him, it risks losing the contest key (2), besides the incumbent key (3). And it will probably still get blamed for the problems the nation has (which show up in subsequent keys).

Obviously, in 1988 this key got a false answer, a plus for Dukakis.

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

Apparently the foment that results in a third party suggests a widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo that bodes ill for the incumbent party. Also, the third candidate may be a way station for disgruntled members of the incumbent party who can't quite bring themselves to vote for an old foe.

The incumbent party lost when Ross Perot ran in 1992, when John Anderson ran as an independent in 1980, and when George Wallace ran on a third ticket in 1968.

But Harry Truman survived when two candidacies split off from the Democrats in 1948, and Bill Clinton survived the less potent Perot challenge of 1996.
In all, this key, standing alone, predicts the outcome of about 70 percent of all presidential elections.

Many Republicans feel that Ross Perot was a bigger problem for them than for Clinton, because he seemed more Republican. Bob Dole tried, in a highly publicized meeting, to get Perot to withdraw from the 1996 race. The keys suggest, however, that Perot was a problem for the Republicans in 1992 and for Clinton in 1996.

To see him as always a greater drain on Republicans requires seeing Perot voters as motivated by what might be called ideological concerns. It requires thinking that they are asking whether the candidate will act in concert with their own values on controversial matters. But, again, voters with strong ideological concerns are probably not the ones who are up for grabs. If a voter wants to see Republican values in the presidency, he's not likely to vote for a non-Republican at the risk of electing a Democrat.

(And, for what it's worth, polls never confirmed the Republican fears about who the Perot voters were. For example, a CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll in late October of 1996 showed 43 percent of Perot voters listing Clinton as their second choice, and only a third listing Bob Dole. Many said they wouldn't vote at all if not for Perot.)
At any rate, in 1988, there was no significant third-party candidacy. So the answer is **true**. A key for Bush.

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

At a certain stage in the 1992 election, five keys seemed to be turned clearly against George Bush. One more, and he would lose. Key 5 was marginal. Even late in the year, it was hard to say whether there had been a recession that year. Just before Labor Day weekend, the government came out with a report saying the economy had lost 200,000 jobs in August. That's when Lichtman turned the key against the incumbent and said his system predicted Clinton victory. The next year, however, the government revised some early conclusions -- which it often does -- and said 1992 was not such a bad year.

As will be noted in another chapter, Bill Clinton, Al Gore and others associated with the 1992 Clinton campaign were familiar with the keys. Clinton's campaign guy, James Carville, coined the phrase, "It's the economy, stupid." Contrary to a re-write of history that has appeared in much political commentary since, this was not the slogan of the Clinton campaign. Bill Clinton did not go around saying, "It's the economy stupid." There were no ads saying that. What an amazing slogan that would have been. The line was just graffiti at Clinton headquarters, put there by Carville as an instruction to campaign aides, an answer to the question:
What do we emphasize? How do we campaign? Carville was saying that Bush's weakness was the economy, which had been sour for several years.

So the question arises: Did Clinton turn the marginal recession key by harping on the down side of the Bush economy? If so, we have a flaw in the keys. A candidate is not supposed to be able to do that. The idea of the keys is that reality is what counts, not political propaganda.

However, if the government itself is reporting a recession that isn't really there, then we are in a nether land between reality and perception. The government's report was important not because all Americans were deeply aware of it directly, but because it helped shape discussion. It shaped how journalists dealt with the economic issues in the campaign. It shaped the hearing Bush got when he tried to paint an optimistic picture. The report itself -- at least -- was a fact, not a perception.

We shall return two chapters hence to the role of this key in 1992.

At any rate, the recession key is the second most powerful of all the keys, itself predicting the outcome of just over 80 percent of all presidential elections.
In 1988 there was no doubt: no recession. Another true, another key for Bush.

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

It's not as complicated as it sounds. It's just an effort to measure whether things are moving in the right direction over the long term.

The presence of two keys about the economy makes unmistakably clear that "prosperity" does matter. Chalk one up for conventional wisdom.

A few caveats, however:

From the Lichtman-DeCell book of 1990, *The 13 Keys to the Presidency:* "No (direct) economic gauge whatsoever ... is necessary to account for the outcome of any election. Fourteen subsystems (of keys) omit both (economy) keys and still achieve perfect prediction for all 33 presidential contests since 1860." (The smallest subsystem involves only keys one through four, plus seven and thirteen, with the incumbent party needing four.)

So why does the system have 13 keys? It's to make sure that as few calls as possible come down to one key, as noted earlier, but also to increase the chances that the system will
continue to be right in future contests.

Meanwhile, of course, the economy is present indirectly in other keys. A bad economy can foment party division, a third-party challenge, even, potentially, social unrest and a loss of congressional seats. Still the ability of the keys to generally work without a direct measure of the economy is worth knowing.

Also worth noting is that the economy keys went in two different directions in four consecutive elections starting in 1972. That suggests that the "prosperity" concept in the "peace and prosperity" cliche is often not very useful in forecasting an election outcome.

Or take 1968: Both economy keys went for the Democrats, and yet the party lost. There were certain problems on the "peace" front. (More about peace below.)

The definition of "prosperity" needs to be focused on. The 1960 election was widely seen at the time as a peace-and-prosperity election. After all, there was no war and no depression. However, both the Lichtman economy keys were turned against Richard Nixon, the candidate of the incumbent Republican Party, who lost. There was a small recession in 1960, and there had been a bigger one in 1958. The 1958 recession was enough to turn the "long-term" key against Nixon.
The 15-year period after World War II is seen in history as a time of extraordinary economic growth that transformed the society from Depression era poverty to modern suburban affluence. How does that square with Lichtman's portrait of the second Eisenhower administration as economically troubled? The answer is that what Lichtman is measuring in the "long-term economy" key is not prosperity (not, in other words, whether people are doing OK) but, much more specifically, growth in prosperity compared to growth over the previous eight years (not 25 or 30). Eisenhower's second term did see overall economic growth, just not enough.

In 1960, though the Great Depression loomed large in the consciousness of millions of American voters, it apparently wasn't relevant in the election outcome. Presidents seem to be judged by more recent criteria. By its second term, the Eisenhower administration was being compared with its first term and with the years right after the war.

An intriguing British example might be relevant: Margaret Thatcher achieved re-election in part by fostering major progress in the British economy. However, by the time she was ousted after three terms, the economy was widely seen as working against her. It was still much better than it had been under her predecessor, but it was not growing as fast as it had in her own early days in office. That meant trouble.
Theoretically, the long-term economy key could be phrased with no comparison with past times. It could be phrased as the mere absence of depression or recession; it could hold that an average unemployment rate below 5 percent (or some other number) is what counts, or a growth rate above a certain amount. But Lichtman found that a comparison with the growth rate of other recent times is a better predictor. The key, standing alone, predicts the outcomes of about 70 percent of all past presidential elections. That tells us something: The key might be said to be more about economic progress than prosperity. Franklin Roosevelt got the key in 1936, 1940 and 1944. None of those years could reasonably be called good times. But the direction was right.

As for 1988, there was no doubt: The second Reagan term had seen no bad years, unlike both of the previous two presidential terms. The key went true, for Bush.

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

When, in this and subsequent keys, Lichtman uses the term "major," he means major. The only presidents in the last five decades who have turned this key were Lyndon Johnson, with the civil rights revolution and the war on poverty, and Ronald Reagan, with major tax cuts and a major defense build-up. It's a key that makes like difficult for a president who does not have clear control of Congress.
How the key works can be seen in the 1992 election, when it turned against George Bush and was decisive. He did not control Congress, but, anyway, he was simply a status-quo president, pushing no major agenda. For some presidents in some periods, that is not fatal. But it's a big problem when the country is dissatisfied with the status quo.

In the first years of the administration of the second President Bush, every indication was that the son was trying to avoid the mistakes of the father. Sometimes there's nothing a president can do to make an economy work. But there are other things a president can do to improve his re-election chances. George W. Bush pushed big tax cuts, a newly aggressive foreign policy (from Day One and after 9-11), a historic change in Social Security and more. After 9-11, the president at first resisted calls for a Department of Homeland Security, but then got on board. The department had become the symbol of major change in response to the attack, and he apparently liked the idea of major change on his watch.

Senior commentator David Broder called the overall list of George W. Bush proposals a "radical" redirection of the government. But he didn't explain where the radicalism came from. How did the laid-back, down-to-earth, moderate governor of Texas, moderate candidate for president and son of a moderate president become a radical? By watching his father lose an election that he could have won if he didn't have a record suggesting that he was satisfied with the status quo.
Anyway, as for 1988, the policy-change key -- which accurately predicts the outcome of just over 70 percent of all elections -- did work for Dukakis, through no fault of Vice President Bush. Reagan's second term was not like his first. The answer was false.

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

The only time this key has been turned since 1932 was 1968. And yet the key alone predicts the outcome of two thirds of all presidential elections. (The key says, if there's no social unrest, go with the incumbent party. If there is social unrest, go with the challenging party. If you follow the key every time, you be right two-thirds of the time.)

In 1988, the answer was true -- there was no social unrest -- and the key turned for Bush.

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

Lichtman's use of the word untainted is unfortunate, because they all seem to be tainted these days. But the key word is major. The general public must perceive the scandal and be offended by it. Since the historic Teapot Dome scandal in the 1920s -- big enough that high-school history students hear
about it -- only Watergate and the Clinton scandals of 2000 have qualified.

Some might disagree about 2000. After all, the public did not favor removing Clinton from office. But that's a too-high standard. The public in general certainly did perceive scandal, unlike in 1996, when Whitewater and other alleged scandals merely raised suspicions. By 2000, the president had lied under oath, and besides carrying on at the White House and lying to the public about it, besides being plagued by other sexual and ethical issues. And the president was impeached, after all.

As for the 1988 election, the Iran-contra scandal of the late Reagan years is somewhat marginal. The offenses were extreme in some views, relating to the actual subversion of official government foreign policy. But Lichtman points out that motivation for the misbehavior -- selling arms to Iraq and using the money for anti-communist insurgents in Nicaragua -- was ideological, not a matter of serving selfish interests, as in Watergate and the Clinton scandals. Also, the biggest charges didn't lead directly to the president. And the Republicans had succeeded in making Democratic attacks look partisan. Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North had testified on television in behalf of the White House and had scored so well he was being called a "national hero" for a short while.
So the scandal key, which predicts the outcome of two-thirds of all presidential elections, turned in favor of Bush in 1988, with a true answer, indicating there was no major scandal. (The key was crucial in determining which way the keys as a whole swung in 1988. There was margin for error.)

**Key 10 (Foreign/military failure):** *The incumbent administration has suffered no major failure in foreign or military affairs.*

See next key.

**Key 11 (Foreign/military success):** *The incumbent administration has achieved a major success in foreign or military affairs.*

Keys 10 and 11 are the ones that come closest to measuring the "peace" issue.

They each predict the outcomes of about 70 percent of all presidential elections, with key 11 slightly better than key 10.

Peace itself doesn't work. Abe Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and Richard Nixon all got re-elected during war. On the other hand, though, the Democrats lost the presidency during the Korean and Vietnam wars. The pattern is that how the war (or the international situation) is going is more important than whether there is war or peace.
In 1960, there was no war, but both these keys were turned against the Eisenhower administration. The failures were multiple: Cuba had fallen to communists. The Soviets had gotten into space first. A summit collapsed after Ike was found to be lying about a spy incident. And there had been no countervailing advance.

Ironically, at the start of the presidential campaign, it was Kennedy who was generally seen as having the bigger problem in foreign policy than Nixon. Kennedy's problem was not only that peace prevailed, but that Nixon was seen as more experienced in foreign policy. Nixon had had a very public confrontation with pugnacious Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, the very symbol of America's difficulties in the world.

The following is from Kennedy biographer Theodore Sorensen's conventional analysis of the first debate between the candidates.

"Even a draw, if it was a draw, was a Kennedy victory," he wrote. "Shocked Republicans could no longer talk of his immaturity and inexperience.... (Afterward) Nixon talked less of who could stand up to Khrushchev."

Finding a pundit who suggested early on that Nixon was the one with the foreign policy problem is not easy. However, if you go by the keys, he was. After all, no key measures foreign policy experience.
In all probability, once a man has been chosen by a major political party as its candidate for president, he has all the credentials he needs to take advantage of the incumbent party's failures.

It should be noted that merely winning a war does not turn a key. In 2000, some might have wondered if the Democrats should be given credit for a major success in military affairs because of the war in Kosovo, which succeeded in taking power over Kosovo from Yugoslavian tyrant Slobodan Milosevic. To turn a key, though, would not be in keeping with the spirit of the keys. The event must result in an improvement in the national situation. Americans clearly don't see the national interest as having much to do with Kosovo.

On the other hand, though, if President Clinton had suffered a humiliating defeat in Kosovo, or had gotten bogged down in a land war, that would have turned the failure key against him. It was a no-win situation, politically.

As for 1988, there was no major failure in foreign policy to turn a key, only historic success: the emergence of the outlines of final victory in the Cold War. The Berlin Wall didn't fall until 1989, under Bush, but real, momentous contention between East and West ended under Reagan on American terms. That was symbolized by Soviet acceptance of a nuclear arms deal in the late 1980s that had been offered
by Reagan in the early 1980s.

Key 10 was true, and Key 11 was true, both foreign policy keys going for Bush.

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

See next key.

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

Keys 12 and 13 look like a concession to the conventional wisdom about the role of personality in politics. But it's a small concession. The candidacies affected positively by these keys are few: Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan are the only modern ones.

Bill Clinton, no; that point is made here because his way with people is often cited as part of the explanation for his political success. No doubt it is. But probably not in general elections. His talent with people is well within the bounds of ordinary in politics. He never created the kind of movie-star excitement that John Kennedy did, or the kind of emotional attachment that Ronald Reagan did. Indeed, by 1994 the pundits were writing precisely the opposite about him, that what's wrong politically with Bill Clinton is that nobody feels passionately in his favor. Let's remember, too, that we
are talking about a president who had exceptionally low poll ratings during the first two years of his presidency.

From an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer on Oct. 16, 1994, from the Washington bureau:

"The president's public approval rating has sunk to a new low of 38 percent, according to a national survey released last week by the Times Mirror Center for People and the Press. Most striking, the poll was taken between Oct. 6 and Oct. 9, when Clinton was at the height of his confrontation with (Iraq's Saddam) Hussein and when his Haiti gamble was looking increasingly like a success.... Clinton remains phenomenally unpopular, and scholars of the presidency say he may be weighted down by factors beyond his ability to change.

"'He seems to evoke some visceral dislike, an antagonism, from so many people,' said George Edwards, director of the Center for Presidential Studies at Texas A&M University. 'It seems to stem less from his performance as a politician or a leader than as a person.'"

When Clinton finally emerged as a popular president in the polls, in the middle of his second term, some conventional pundits tried to find an explanation in his skill as a communicator or his skill with people. But he only achieved consistently high ratings after the evidence was clear that the country was thriving on his watch. That is the explanation for
his popularity, not his persona.

Who might pass the "national hero" threshold? Colin Powell? No. True his poll ratings were astronomical before the 1996 election, when he was talked about as a possible presidential candidate. But he did not have the public standing of Dwight Eisenhower -- the last military man in the presidency, a definite national hero. The normal attacks that come along in politics bounced off Ike. They were as nothing in the light of his history of high-profile accomplishment, nothing in the face of the long, loving relationship between him and the people, the likes of which isn't there for Powell.

Even John Glenn never got the "national hero" thing working for him in presidential politics. Maybe he would have if he had survived the primaries, but he got absolutely nowhere in 1984.

Key 12 -- is the incumbent candidate charismatic? -- is enough to predict the outcome of presidential elections only about 60 percent of the time; the thirteenth is enough about 70 percent.

In 1998, there was nary a hero or charismatic figure to be found. One false, meaning for Dukakis, and one true, for Bush.
Counting up the "falses" we get only three, that is, only three factors counting against the incumbent party's candidate, Bush.

The biggest "upset" the keys have ever called -- the prediction most in conflict with the prevailing wisdom -- wasn't even a close call for the keys.