

**Add it up: The prediction models look dismal for Obama. Can he still win?**  
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**By Jeff Greenfield**

I got into writing and thinking about politics because I was told there would be no math. Boy, was I misled. It's not just the torrent of polls that we have to deal with, but the numbers that supposedly forecast Presidential elections with uncanny accuracy. Depending on whom you turn to, the key lies in second quarter real GDP growth, the optimism or pessimism of the electorate, individual or family real income growth or a dizzying mix of these and other measurements.

They're usually economic, although one prognosticator—Allan Lichtman, history professor at American University—uses broader measurements, asking whether the incumbent or challenger is charismatic or whether the incumbent party has presided over a major change in social policy. (This is considered a positive, although I don't know if we've ever had a case like the Affordable Care Act, which—unlike every other major social change—passed without bipartisan backing and remains broadly unpopular.)

I'm a skeptic about the predictive power of these numbers for many reasons. For one thing, the "sample size," which totals about twenty or so Presidential elections since most of these measurements were first made, is too small. For another, they work—unless they don't. In 1968, strong economic figures were trumped by a divisive war and by social unrest. In 2000, every economic forecasting model predicted that Al Gore would win a comfortable or landslide plurality. They were "right" in the sense that he got half a million more votes than Bush; they were "wrong" in the fundamental outcome they offered.

So it's with that skepticism in mind that I offer, not a prediction, but a flat pre-election assessment: If President Barack Obama is to win, he is going to have to overcome a set of numbers that no incumbent President, or incumbent party, has ever managed to surmount.

The jobless rate has been stuck at just above 8 per cent for months; you have to go back to 1936 to find a President re-elected with a higher unemployment rate. And in Franklin D. Roosevelt's case, it was a far better number than he had inherited. Plus, growth was booming.

Today, real growth is at 1.5 per cent. In the economic forecasting models, this portends what even the liberal arts majors have been predicting: a very close election.

The core question for many voters—"Are you generally satisfied with the country's direction, or has the U.S. gone off on the wrong track"—gets a 32.7-60.7 negative answer, according to the

RealClearPolitics average. Generally, an incumbent party needs to have at least a 35% positive response to this question to win the election, says the Gallup Organization.

The consumer confidence level is now about 60 per cent. No incumbent party has ever kept the White House with a number anything like that. (It was slightly higher, at 65 per cent, in 1980 when Carter lost in a landslide.)

Now, try this as a thought exercise. Forget who is running, what the latest gaffe of the day is, who is outraged and what latest insult to what group has been perpetrated by the candidate or his staff. Ignore whom you're rooting for, and just look at those numbers with the ice-cold heart of a bean counter.

What you would conclude, I think, is that there is no way an incumbent President could get re-elected given these current numbers.

In this sense, the 2012 election is going to test just how predictive many of these "fundamental" models are, and whether the assertion of some forecasters—that the outcome can be known irrespective of candidates and campaigns—is valid.

Why? Because, to put it bluntly: The Republicans have nominated a bad candidate.

Some (very) brief history and a hypothesis. Six years ago, Mitt Romney and his team realized that he could never win the Republican nomination as the pragmatic, moderate-conservative with moderate-to-liberal views on everything from abortion to gun control to the environment to health care. (The mandate was a conservative position back then, but put that aside.) When Team Romney saw Sen. George Allen, the likely 2008 social conservative hero, lose his re-election bid in 2006, they found an opening, and decided to reach, or lunge, for that slot.

And so, throughout the 2008 campaign and throughout this one, Romney has been running as if to claim that his four years in higher office was a case of mistaken identity. I think it has forced him to campaign in mortal fear of every word he utters, to pander to local pride and political constituencies in a manner that seems a parody of the clumsy politician.

At root, Romney is a candidate in the grip of performance anxiety. And whether on the tennis court or in more intimate settings performance anxiety is a near-guarantee of poor performance.

It's often said that a re-election campaign is always about the incumbent; like many political observations, that's partly, but not wholly, true. Even when the electorate is disposed to replace the President, it has to be satisfied that the challenger is up to the job. Mitt Romney has yet to meet that test.

The Obama campaign, however, can take very limited comfort from Romney's discomfit. If the "fundamental" numbers continue to be as grim as they now are, the desire to change course will deepen. And the more that longing intensifies, the lower the bar Mitt Romney will have to clear.

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