'This time, I predict Trump will lose'

An interview with Allan Lichtman — one of the few forecasters who predicted the victory of Donald Trump in 2016

In the 1980s, historian Allan Lichtman teamed up with a Russian seismologist to develop a model for the prediction of US presidential elections. Over the past four decades, his system has accurately foretold the respective victors. Lichtman was one of the few forecasters who predicted the victory of Donald Trump in 2016.

Your prediction is based on 13 factors – the so-called "Keys to the White House" which look at items such as economic and foreign policy performance, social unrest and scandals, as well as the charisma of the candidates. You completely ignore any current polls, opinions of pundits, major events, campaigning or TV debates. Why do you think is your method superior to the work of, for example, Gallup, RealClearPolitics or FiveThirtyEight?

> Well, as we know, all of those pollsters were wrong in 2016, whereas I was right in predicting the Trump win and sticking to it despite the enormous criticism. You can imagine predicting a Trump win in 90 per cent Democratic Washington D.C. did not make me very popular. So why are the pollsters and compilers of polls like Nate Silver of FiveThirtyEight often wrong? Polls are not predictors, they're snapshots. And those snapshots unpredictably change.
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> Secondly, they don't actually poll voters. They poll something called likely voters, which requires an estimate which leads to error. So when they tell you our error margin is plus or minus three percent, that's pure statistical error. It doesn't take into account the errors from estimating likely voters or people not having made up their minds really and just telling you something. The keys to the White House are different because they are based on the dynamics of how elections really work. Elections in America are referenda for the president up or down on the strength and performance of the party holding the White House. And that's what the keys to the White House gauge. They've been so successful because they were developed going all the

way back to 1860 – the horse and buggy days of politics when Abraham Lincoln was elected – through 1980 when Ronald Reagan won the election.

You successfully foretold Trumps victory in 2016. What is your prediction for this year and what are the main keys which are different to the last election?

In 2016, Trump was the challenger. So the way my system works, if six or more of the 13 keys go against the party holding the White House, there are predicted losers. So in 2016, I was gauging the incumbent Democrats. Now I am gauging the incumbent Republicans and Donald Trump. This time, I predict Trump will lose.

At the end of 2019, he was two keys short of the six needed to predict the defeat of the party holding the White House. But then we have this failed response to the challenges of the pandemic and the cries for social and racial justice. And that led to the loss of three more keys: the short term economic key gauged on having an election year recession, the long term economic key because of the drag on growth, and, of course, the social unrest key because of what was raging across the line. So he goes from four keys down to seven keys down, one more than is needed to predict Donald Trump's defeat.

Never in the history of the United States as the party holding the White House ever suffered such a sudden and dramatic reversal of fortune in just a matter of a few months. And Trump has no one to blame but himself, because when you're the incumbent, it's governing, not campaigning that counts.

Why are you so confident that Trump will be actually defeated in November? After all, in 2016, you said "Donald Trump has made this the most difficult election I've had to assess since 1984. We've never before seen a candidate like Donald Trump, which suggests this election could go either way." Why isn't the same thing true for this year's election?

It's a totally different situation because he's the incumbent now and he is going to be judged on his record. He is still this unconventional wrecking ball candidate and that's not going to help him win. But I have to tell you two things which keep me awake at night that are outside the realm of the keys or any prediction.

One is voter suppression. Republicans depend on the votes of old white guys like me. And that's why they are so desperate to suppress the vote of the rising Democratic base of minorities and young people. They are filing lawsuits all over America to make it harder to vote.

They've messed up the post office. Trump is threatening to send armed personnel to the polling places and he's fiercely attacked mail in voting. This worries me because democracy depends on a free and fair election.

The second thing is Russian intervention. The FBI said they're back. They've probably learned a lot in four years. They may even try to get into our voting technology. And we know Trump is already welcoming and exploiting Russian intervention.

The factor "social unrest" – which for you is a point against Trump – specifically caught my attention. Most experts would probably say that Trump benefits from unrest and riots as it gives him the possibility to position himself as the strongman, the "law and order"-candidate as well as that it distracts from the catastrophic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and his botched response. You disagree?

Completely. You know, you can weave whatever stories you want, but what makes the keys successful is you don't look behind them. You don't say, oh, this key doesn't apply this year because maybe Donald Trump can benefit from that. That counterfeits the system. Moreover, I understand Donald Trump is trying to channel Richard Nixon's 1968 Law and Order campaign. The problem is Richard Nixon was the challenger then, Donald Trump is the incumbent. He owns what is happening in America. It's not a very persuasive argument to say elect me in November and I will stop all the terrible things that are happening while I am president. As Herbert Hoover, who presided over the Great Depression, knew, he once said: the President gets the credit for the sunshine and the blame for the rain. And it's raining pretty hard in America right now.

One of the most heatedly discussed issues before most U.S. elections is the debate about gun control. In your latest book "Repeal the Second Amendment: The Case for a Safer America" you argue that advocates for gun control should completely change their strategy. Why?

They must change their strategy to a proactive, forward looking strategy of repealing the Second Amendment which was never intended to establish an unlimited private right to keep and bear arms. The simple reason is that their current "play not to lose"-strategy supporting the Second Amendment has spectacularly failed. We haven't passed a national gun control measure since the assault weapons ban in 1994 which was later repealed. It's twenty six years of absolute futility. Gun control advocates are still getting nowhere with things like universal background checks, which 90 percent of the American people support, because their strategy is so weak.

In 2019 alone, there were 419 mass-shooting incidents and almost 40 000 deaths *(24 090 suicides)*related to gun violence. Insane numbers. However, according to polls, 70 percent still say there should not be a law that would ban the possession of handguns. If Joe Biden were promising to actually repeal the Second Amendment once he's President (with the support of the Democrat Members of Congress), don't you think he would lose the election?

Absolutely not. Look, this is a phony argument. Repealing the Second Amendment doesn't mean your guns are going to be confiscated or that handguns are going to be banned. That's nonsense. The only time the Second Amendment has been interpreted to protect the private right to keep and bear arms was the Heller decision in 2010. For almost 200 years, we lived comfortably with the Second Amendment that only protected the collective right of defense to a well regulated militia. There were a lot of gun control laws going all the way back to the colonial period, but no confiscation of guns, no ban on guns.

The repeal of the Second Amendment, as I point out in my book, would open the door to reasonable gun controls like assault weapons ban, permit requirements, universal background checks and red flag laws which the overwhelming majority of the American people support. And by the way, the NRA, which for so many years has beaten the drum for the unlimited right to keep and bear arms, is under internal scandals which show that the gun lobby is nothing more than a racket to enrich its leaders and stiff its ordinary employees.

Changing an amendment requires two-thirds of the House and Senate and three-quarters of the states. According to the *National Constitution Center* the chances of that happening are "roughly the same as a person living to 80 years old being struck by lightning during their lifetime". Isn't your goal completely unrealistic?

Paraphrasing Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who once said: the most worthwhile things seemed impossible at the time. Remember, we have already repealed an amendment, the Prohibition Amendment. And before the repeal, all of the conventional wisdom and authorities were saying: it's impossible, Prohibition is here forever. Who would have thought we would have legalized gay marriage as a constitutional right 20 or 30 years ago? It seemed absolutely impossible. So you're absolutely right, it's very difficult, but we can still strive for it. And the very striving for it will give new momentum and new purpose to the gun control movement. The game needs to be changed. The current path is the path to defeat. Whenever you play not to lose, you're guaranteed to lose.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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