

CU-Boulder analysis of election factors points to Romney win

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A University of Colorado analysis of state-by-state factors leading to the Electoral College selection of every U.S. president since 1980 forecasts that the 2012 winner will be Mitt Romney.

The key is the economy, say political science professors Kenneth Bickers of CU-Boulder and Michael Berry of CU Denver. Their [prediction model](#) stresses economic data from the 50 states and the District of Columbia, including both state and national [unemployment figures](#) as well as changes in real per capita income, among other factors.

"Based on our forecasting model, it becomes clear that the president is in electoral trouble," said Bickers, also director of the CU in DC Internship Program.

According to their analysis, President [Barack Obama](#) will win 218 votes in the Electoral College, short of the 270 he needs. And though they chiefly focus on the Electoral College, the [political scientists](#) predict Romney will win 52.9 percent of the popular vote to Obama's 47.1 percent, when considering only the two major political parties.

"For the last eight [presidential elections](#), this model has correctly predicted the winner," said Berry. "The economy has seen some improvement since President Obama took office. What remains to be seen is whether voters will consider the economy in relative or absolute terms. If it's the former, the president may receive credit for the economy's trajectory and win a second term. In the latter case, Romney

should pick up a number of states Obama won in 2008."

Their model correctly predicted all elections since 1980, including two years when independent candidates ran strongly, 1980 and 1992. It also correctly predicted the outcome in 2000, when [Al Gore](#) received the most popular vote but George W. Bush won the election.

The study will be published this month in PS: Political Science & Politics, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Political Science Association. It will be among about a dozen election prediction models, but one of only two to focus on the Electoral College.

While many forecast models are based on the [popular vote](#), the Electoral College model developed by Bickers and Berry is the only one of its type to include more than one state-level measure of economic conditions.

In addition to state and national unemployment rates, the authors looked at per capita income, which indicates the extent to which people have more or less disposable income. Research shows that these two factors affect the major parties differently: Voters hold Democrats more responsible for unemployment rates while Republicans are held more responsible for per capita income.

Accordingly -- and depending largely on which party is in the White House at the time -- each factor can either help or hurt the major parties disproportionately.

Their results show that "the apparent advantage of being a Democratic candidate and holding the White House disappears when the national unemployment rate hits 5.6 percent," Berry said. The results indicate, according to Bickers, "that the incumbency advantage enjoyed by President Obama, though statistically significant, is not great enough to offset high rates of unemployment currently experienced in many of the

states."

In an examination of other factors, the authors found that none of the following had any statistically significant effect on whether a state ultimately went for a particular candidate: The location of a party's national convention; the home state of the vice president; or the partisanship of state governors.

In 2012, "What is striking about our state-level economic indicator forecast is the expectation that Obama will lose almost all of the states currently considered as swing states, including North Carolina, Virginia, New Hampshire, Colorado, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida," Bickers said.

In Colorado, which went for Obama in 2008, the model predicts that Romney will receive 51.9 percent of the vote to Obama's 48.1 percent, again with only the two major parties considered.

The authors also provided caveats. Factors they said may affect their prediction include the timeframe of the economic data used in the study and close tallies in certain states. The current data was taken five months in advance of the Nov. 6 election and they plan to update it with more current [economic data](#) in September. A second factor is that states very close to a 50-50 split may fall an unexpected direction.

"As scholars and pundits well know, each election has unique elements that could lead one or more states to behave in ways in a particular election that the model is unable to correctly predict," Berry said.

Election prediction models "suggest that presidential elections are about big things and the stewardship of the national economy," Bickers said. "It's not about gaffes, political commercials or day-to-day campaign tactics. I find that heartening for our democracy."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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