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Do better or get out

Presidents who don't win bigger in re-election don't win at all

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

Facing a potentially tough re-election fight, it will be a challenge for Barack Obama to get to 270 Electoral College votes. Sure, if we use the 2008 results as a starting point, he would seem to have a built-in cushion. He won the votes of several states that are usually sure bets for Republicans, such as Indiana and North Carolina.

But paradoxically, Obama's surprise victory in those red states means that he could have a tough hill to climb in 2012. Almost uniformly, presidential candidates either improve on their original victory total — or they lose. What they don't do is win with fewer Electoral College or popular votes than they received the first time around. For presidents seeking re-election, the rule has been simple: "Do better or get out."

The historical numbers tell the tale. Twenty-four presidents have sought and received their party's nomination for re-election; 15 of them won. Of those 15, only one — Woodrow Wilson — received fewer electoral votes in his re-election campaign and still managed to win re-election. And only Andrew Jackson may have received a smaller percentage of the popular vote in his re-election campaign — although, back when Jackson was re-elected, not all states counted popular votes, so it's hard to say for sure.

Anyone who took high school history realizes that Wilson's electoral numbers get a major asterisk. In his original election in 1912, Wilson was running in a three-person race against Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, who split the Republican vote and allowed Wilson to rack up what was at the time one of the largest Electoral College margins in history. Wilson barely squeaked by in his re-election run in 1916, triumphing in no small part because of a feud between Charles Evans Hughes, the Republican nominee, and Hiram Johnson, the governor of California.

There are other caveats to the 15-person list above, but they are minor. Franklin Roosevelt did worse in his third and fourth victories, but he could hardly have done any better than he did in his crushing first re-election race. James Madison had a lower percentage of the Electoral College vote, though he had a higher total amount of Electoral College votes, because the size of the Electoral College increased during his first administration.

Other elected officials, both in America and globally, don't seem to follow this "do better or get out" rule. For instance, Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick's victory margin fell more than 7 percent between his first and second gubernatorial runs, but not enough for him to lose his job. And Rick Perry saw his margin drop from about 18 percent to less than 10 percent (albeit in a four-person race) in his first re-election try. Even Ronald Reagan saw this happen during his gubernatorial career: He lost almost 5 percentage points from his original election in 1966 to his re-election in 1970.

International leaders also have a tendency to do worse in their re-elections. German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder won a convincing election in 1998, but barely survived his re-

election in 2002. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party actually won a smaller percentage of the popular vote (though many more seats) in her re-election race in 1983.

None of this is to say that Obama couldn't buck this historic trend. He did win 95 more Electoral College votes than needed. And there were several states that he barely lost or that have undergone enough change that he could possibly take them.

But he's at a disadvantage this time around. Due to the once-in-a-decade reapportionment of congressional (and Electoral College) seats, even if he won all the same states as he did in 2008, he would come out with six fewer electoral votes. There is an obvious logic to the "Do better or get out" rule. As Reagan aptly put it, elections are often an answer to the question: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" If the answer is no, presidents, unlike governors or senators, can't pass the buck upwards.

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