

Please Don't Shoot the Messenger

☒ We hear it over and over again from conservatives explaining why Mitt Romney will win. No president has won re-election with unemployment over 8 percent, they tell us, hoping the streak will continue this time around.

There's just one problem. It's not true.

Franklin Roosevelt won re-election with unemployment not only over 8 percent, he won with unemployment at Depression Era levels of around 20 percent!

When FDR won the presidency in 1932, the unemployment rate was a staggering 23.5 percent. A year later in 1933 it was 24.7 percent. In 1934 it was just under 22 percent. In 1935, for the first time in his presidency, unemployment dipped below 20 percent, but only to 19.97 percent. And by 1936, when he ran for re-election, 16.8 percent of Americans still couldn't find jobs.

So during FDR's first term the unemployment rate ranged from a high of nearly 25 percent to a low of about 17 percent – and he still won re-election.

Then in 1937, 14 percent of Americans were still out of work. In 1938, unemployment went back up to about 19 percent. In 1939 it was 17 percent, and in 1940, it was down to 14.45 percent.

So at no point during his first two terms had unemployment gone below that 14.45 percent, yet Roosevelt not only won re-election, he was re-elected to a *third term* – the first time that had ever happened in the entire history of the United States.

So, all this talk about how no president can win re-election with 8 percent of Americans out of work is wishful thinking at best, nonsense at worst.

FDR had a few things going for him that might be worth considering as Election Day approaches. First, he could blame it all on his Republican predecessor under whose watch the economy tanked. Second, FDR connected with ordinary Americans. In a word, they *liked* him.

Sound familiar?

Barack Obama has also said he inherited an economic mess. It's true that he didn't do anything to make things substantially better and arguably made things worse. Nonetheless, polls have shown that more Americans still blame George Bush for our economic doldrums than they blame Mr. Obama.

And even though many conservatives detest Barack Obama – as they did FDR – he scores high on likeability in the polls – and Romney doesn't.

This may explain why, in the face of a sluggish economy that might be headed for a second recession, President Obama is still leading in most of the polls. History may not exactly repeat itself, but it often rhymes, as Mark Twain once observed.

Don't shoot the messenger.