ECONOMY

Boon to Bush? Recession Might Predate President

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Just whose recession was it after all?

The National Bureau of Economic Research declared more than two years ago that the last recession began in March 2001, meaning that it fell on President Bush's watch. But the NBER committee that determines recession dates is considering whether to make the date as early as November 2000, when Bill Clinton was president.

Such a change would be a stroke of good fortune for the Bush administration, which has long argued that the financial bubble of the late 1990s burst on President Clinton's watch and has therefore pointed to him for the blame. Mr. Bush's opponents, on the other hand, have fired back that the substantial job losses of the recession have occurred while Mr. Bush has been president.

Of course, countless factors outside a president's power influence the $10 trillion U.S. economy.

The NBER is a private, nonprofit economic research group that is considered the official arbiter of recession timing. The NBER's business-cycle dating committee is made up of academics who consider themselves divorced from the political calculations that are likely to greet any change in the date.

Robert Hall, a Stanford University economics professor who heads the seven-member committee, said the academics made a decision last summer to place added emphasis on trends in the nation's gross domestic product, which is the broadest measure of economic output, in determining when recessions begin and end. Since then, a set of comprehensive revisions to GDP data released in December by the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis points to an earlier date.

Mr. Hall said "a reasonable look at the numbers" could lead one to conclude that a better date would be some time between November 2000 and February 2001.
However, he was careful to note that a decision hadn't been made on whether there would be a revision or what the new date would be.

Mr. Hall said a decision on the dates could come "soon." The recession officially ended in November 2001.

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