

Family ties: why political dynasties rule in America's democracy

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In November 2014, George Bush was [elected](#) Land Commissioner of Texas. This was not the former president, nor his presidential father. Instead, 38-year-old George P. Bush, eldest son of former Florida governor Jeb Bush, became the latest member of [his family](#) to enter public office.

At the same time in Massachusetts, [Joseph Kennedy III](#), son of a [former congressman](#), grandson of a former US senator and presidential candidate ([Robert F. Kennedy](#)) and the scion of the storied [Kennedy family](#), was re-elected to the US House of Representatives. These are but a few examples of the many politicians with significant close family ties who voters elected in 2014.

Could Americans be faced with a choice between former First Lady [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Jeb Bush](#) when electing their next president in 2016?

Why is this important?

A guiding principle of the US Declaration of Independence was that [“all men are created equal”](#). This notion is reinforced in the US Constitution, which states:

No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States.

The problem is that this is simply not true.

Political dynasties have played a significant role throughout America's history. Their ongoing existence and prominence convey a level of inequality in access to political influence that has spanned the country's history.

Despite successfully revolting against Britain's ruling monarchy, [almost half](#) of the elected representatives to the first US Congress (1789-1991) served alongside a blood relative. Since the US became an independent republic in 1789, almost 400 parent-child duos and more than 190 pairs of siblings have served in Congress. More than 700 families have had two or more members in Congress.

The existence of dynasties in American politics brings into question the legitimacy of the country's democracy.

Businesses oppose monopolies and cartels because they are considered bad for the economy. Competition is thought to deliver better economic outcomes. Why, then, in the world's leading capitalist economy and arbiter of democracy do political dynasties exist, particularly when power is enshrined with the people through free elections?

How can the political dynasties be explained if 'all men are created equal'? US Constitution

The historical context

America's Founding Fathers were so determined to prevent the rise of monarchy that they created a system of government whereby voters elect almost every conceivable public office.

Last November, citizens in Georgia voted for 19 different public offices. Including primary elections and run-off elections (where the top-two vote-winners advance when no candidate receives a majority of the vote), Georgian voters had potentially participated in seven separate elections in ten months, from March 2014 to January 2015.

By comparison, voters in Victoria, Australia, cast a ballot for just four public offices (the lower and upper houses) in two separate elections between September 2013 (federal election) and November 2014 (state election).

This highly democratic process results in hundreds of elections each year across America. As a result, it is unreasonable to expect voters to remember who is running for what office in every instance.

At the same time, almost all of the candidates for these offices would have undertaken election campaigns. As a result, voters would have experienced a seemingly unending flow of political advertising. Is it then possible that, in the modern information age, voters might actually be less informed as a result of the constant “noise” of election advertising causing them to tune out?

The Kennedy dynasty continues to be represented in Washington by Congressman Joseph P. Kennedy III. EPA/Tannen Maury

Name recognition is therefore highly desirable in American election campaigns. Voters are often more comfortable with [what and whom they know](#). Name (or brand) recognition is common in marketing, because if consumers like and trust one product, then they are more likely to favour another product of the same brand over an unknown or untested brand. Consequently, voters may be more likely to favour a name they recognise once inside the polling booth.

This is not to say that the same families have dominated America’s politics, although my research has thus far identified 167 families with members elected to public office for at least three consecutive generations. Twenty-two families have had at least four consecutive generations elected to public office, while four families – [Bachhuber/Doyle](#), [Cocke](#), [Lee](#) and [Washburn](#) – have had at least five generations.

The relative fluidity with which voters appear to favour new families is one interesting aspect of American politics. What remains constant, though, is that while political families are gradually replaced, they are succeeded by new political families. For a long time, American voters were enamoured with the [Harrison family](#) (Continental Congress to 1969), electing four successive generations, including two presidents. Voters then moved on to the Bush family (1952 to present), also electing four generations, and two presidents.

The existence of political dynasties has important consequences for America’s democratic legitimacy. A small number of families monopolising political power can undermine the quality of democratic representation for citizens. Consider this as we prepare for the impending flood of interest in the 2016 presidential race.