

The illusion of choice: why the 2016 presidential race looks like 2000

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The Republican National Committee's [2016 Straw Poll](#) features 19 announced or anticipated presidential candidates. Just Thursday, [Rick Perry](#) officially threw his hat in the ring, and Jeb Bush announced he will [formally launch](#) his bid on June 15.

The [Democratic National Committee's web page](#) features just four.

Sound familiar?

In 2000, 13 individuals sought the Republican presidential nomination, while the Democratic primary contest featured just two.

Why is the 2016 presidential election looking increasingly like 2000?

The 2016 election reflects an increasingly predetermined quality of the American political process, with the notion of a competitive primary campaign largely an illusion. Despite the fact that there are almost two dozen candidates, there is actually less choice. So Americans have to ask themselves: just how democratic is the presidential nominating process?

The Republican tradition of anointment

Since 1976, the Republican Party has developed a tradition of anointing the runner-up from the previous presidential nomination contest as its candidate for the next election.

In 1976, Gerald Ford narrowly won the Republican nomination over Ronald Reagan. In 1980, Reagan was the party's nominee.

In 1980, George H.W. Bush was runner-up to Reagan, and in 1988, Bush won the nomination, defeating Bob Dole.

In 1996, Dole was the nominee, with [Pat Buchanan](#) finishing second. In 2000, however, Buchanan was not rewarded per tradition, with the party instead looking to an establishment favorite, George W. Bush, who won the nomination over John McCain.

In 2008, the Party returned to tradition by awarding the nomination to McCain, who defeated Mitt Romney. And in 2012, Romney [beat Rick Santorum](#) to the nomination.

Pat Buchanan: Not a GOP fave. REUTERS

Despite [formally announcing](#) his campaign, Rick Santorum – like Pat Buchanan – will not be the Republican nominee in 2016.

Why the GOP is just not that into Santorum and Buchanan

What is it about Santorum and Buchanan that the Republican Party does not like? Despite his runner-up status in 2012, Santorum is [not regarded as a front-runner](#) for the nomination, or in fact, anywhere near it.

It cannot be a coincidence that the only two occasions in the past 40 years that the Republican Party hasn't followed its nominating tradition is when the runner-up is a staunch Christian conservative who would arguably not fare at all well in a general election. During the 2000 nominating contest, the Republican establishment

coalesced around George W. Bush's candidacy long before the primary season began, and as a result, Bush became the first Republican to win the presidency despite losing the New Hampshire primary (to John McCain).

Like 2000, the Republican Party establishment appears to be set to choose their [favored](#) candidate, at the expense of Rick Santorum. And once again a Bush is the front-runner, with Jeb Bush [dominating](#) the six leading polls (and Santorum faring no better than tenth).

Al Gore was virtually unopposed for the Democratic nod in 2000. REUTERS/Gary Hershorn

The Democratic Party coronation process

On the Democratic side, there are also similarities with 2000. That year, former US senator Bill Bradley was the only candidate who attempted to derail Al Gore's coronation. In 2016, the Democratic Party is similarly yawning its way to the [2016 National Convention](#) in Philadelphia, where Hillary Clinton will accept her party's presidential nomination. At this point, she has four declared opponents: Vermont's Bernie Sanders, Rhode Island's Lincoln Chafee and Maryland's Martin O'Malley, while Jim Webb is making a tentative exploration. None of these candidates – at this point – is considered a major challenger.

In September 1999, more than one year before Election Day and months before the first caucus in Iowa and first primary in New Hampshire, the phrase "air of inevitability" [was being used](#) to describe Bush and Gore as the eventual presidential candidates. The same term is being used 16 years later with [Jeb Bush](#) and [Hillary Clinton](#), although on the surface Jeb's claim appears slightly more tenuous than his brother's was at the same point in the pre-primary season.

The limited choices for voters

Despite the apparent transparency of the nominating process, voters actually have very little say in determining their presidential nominees.

In his 2000 book, [The Press and the Modern Presidency](#), Louis Liebovich wrote that George W Bush and Al Gore were crowned prohibitive favorites two years before the general election vote. And in [A Citizen's Guide to Presidential Nominations](#) (2015), Wayne P. Steger also suggests that parties anoint their inevitable nominees long before the first primary election.

In addition, the mathematics of the Electoral College strongly predetermines results even before Election Day in November 2016. Based on how each state has voted over the past four presidential elections, the Democrats begin the election knowing they have already won 242 Electoral College votes, while the Republicans have just 180. California is as certain to vote Democrat as Alabama is to vote Republican.

The heir apparent in the Bush dynasty: Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush. REUTERS/Rick Wilking

Further, if we add those states that have voted for one party three times out of the past four elections, then the Democrats' Electoral College vote count increases to 257, and the Republicans to 206. What this means is that the Democratic nominee doesn't need to win either Ohio or Florida to win the presidency, but the Republican nominee must win both to even have a chance; further strengthening Jeb Bush's claim.

American democracy?

The US now experiences – or some might say endures – a permanent political campaign. Between now and November 2016, billions of dollars will be raised and spent by candidates, parties, PACs and organizations, but what is it really for? In coining the phrase "[the iron law of oligarchy](#)" in 1911, Robert Michels argued that even in democratic organizations, political leadership would entrench itself in power, undermining the democratic principles of a level playing field.

What does all this mean for American democracy? My research in examining why voters elect members of the [same family to public office](#) reveals an interesting story about the nature of American politics: that despite the

appearance of a democratic process, candidate selection and election outcomes appear to be predetermined, and consistent with the establishment of a political ruling class.