

# *2016 Endorsements: How and Why They Matter*

By Lynn Vavreck

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[William “Boss” Tweed](#) captured the importance of the nominating process when he said that he didn’t care who did the electing, as long as he got to do the nominating. The choice of nominee can determine the future course and fortune of a party — such as whether it tilts right or left — and the likelihood of victory. No wonder the political scientist [Nelson Polsby](#) described nominating candidates as the central purpose of a political party.

The rise of primaries and caucuses in the 1960s and 1970s reduced the sway that party elites like Boss Tweed had long held in the nominating process and transferred power to rank-and-file voters. But the elites have found ways to take back some of that power. The form of their influence is different, but their impact remains.

Party elites have figured out that they can nudge voters one way or another by coming to a consensus on whom to nominate in the year before the primaries — the so-called [invisible-primary](#) stage. The smoke-filled back room of the convention hall, where party bosses hashed out who would run for office, has been replaced by a year of behind-the-scenes maneuvering, in which candidates try to win over their fellow politicians as well as campaign operatives and donors. The endorsements and donations garner mainly positive media attention for a candidate, and the candidate’s poll numbers then typically increase. These increases generate more positive media coverage, which in turn generates more endorsements and donations, and rivals are winnowed out of the competition.



Jeb Bush has received most of the major endorsements in the G.O.P. race so far, but the pace of endorsements has been slow. Credit...Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist for The New York Times

If you care about the quality of the democratic process, the influence of party elites has both benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, party leaders have been paying attention to the candidates for much longer — and much more intensely — than ordinary voters, giving them insight into which ones have the temperament, intelligence and experience to run the country. On the negative side, the process puts a disproportionate amount of political influence in the hands of political professionals and affluent donors.

How powerful is this cycle of picking, proclaiming and promoting? Since 1980, the single best predictor of a party's nominee is the number of endorsements from party elites — elected officials and prominent past party leaders — in the months before primaries begin, according to [The Party Decides](#), a 2008 book by Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel and John Zaller.

The most effective recent winnowing came in 1999, when George W. Bush locked up much of the Republican elite, boxing out other candidates like Elizabeth Dole, Lamar Alexander and Dan Quayle before the nominating process was even in full swing. But the pattern can also be less obvious. In the 2012 cycle, many people thought the Republican party was adrift in a sea of mainly mediocre candidates. Even as voters searched for “anyone but Romney,” the pattern held: In the year before the election, Mitt Romney won more endorsements than anyone else.

The pace of the endorsements, however, came more slowly in 2012 than in some other years, which did indeed leave an opening for an alternative to Mr. Romney, even if no rival was strong enough to take advantage of it. So far, the 2016 cycle looks more like 2012 than 2000 — with party leaders holding back endorsements in search of the right candidate.

There are two important things to know about the state of 2016 Republican endorsements today: [Very few](#) party leaders have endorsed a candidate, but among those who have, most have endorsed Jeb Bush.

This combination tells us that elites are reluctant to jump on board, but also that Mr. Bush is looking like a strong contender. However, he is probably in a weaker position than Mr. Romney was at a similar point four years ago, because this year's field includes more candidates with the background and experience to be credible picks for the nomination.

To date, only about 14 percent — 45 of 331 — of sitting Republican governors, senators and House members have endorsed a candidate. Those who have endorsed are mainly elected officials from candidates' home states. (I have compiled these data with John Sides, a political scientist at George Washington University.)

Although it's obviously early, Mr. Bush has emerged as the endorsement front-runner. He has received 14 of the initial 45 endorsements; yet 11 of these 14 are from his home state of Florida. Next in line are Rand Paul (nine endorsers, five of whom are outside his home state of Kentucky) and Chris Christie (seven, three of whom are from outside New Jersey). John Kasich has three and Scott Walker has two endorsements, all from their respective home states. Others in the field — Marco Rubio, Lindsey Graham, Rick Perry, Rick Santorum and Mike Huckabee — have a single endorsement each. Mr. Rubio's relative weakness among his fellow Floridians may be a sign of his campaign's early struggles.

The slow pace of the endorsements suggests a party still working behind the scenes to coalesce around a candidate. Some of the slowness may stem from questions about Mr. Bush, including the wisdom of nominating a third Bush for president within three decades. But perhaps the bigger factor is that the field includes more than one viable candidate, causing some hesitation among

party leaders about which is best. This is a very different situation from the one in 2012, even though the pace of endorsements looks similar.

How will the party decide? Its [first debate](#) is Aug. 6. If one or two of the party favorites does well, it may generate a spate of endorsements. But party elites are also running out of time. The campaign is quickly approaching the point when the elites are no longer kingmakers but are instead more akin to traffic cops — merely helping to direct people one way or another instead of choosing the ultimate destination.

It's not quite the power that Boss Tweed dreamed of, but the insiders still have substantial power over a process that was designed to empower individual voters.

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