Chapter 1

The Making of the Process

In the first volume of this series, The Pursuit of the Presidency, we studied the elections of 1980 through 1996. Two of the three presidents who were elected during those five elections were reelected to serve a full second term. Only George H. W. Bush failed in this regard. The next four elections—the ones we shall study in this second volume—saw two more presidents elected to second terms. Thus the White House saw the greatest concentration of two-term presidents since the era of Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Jackson at the start of the nineteenth century when four of five consecutive presidents completed two full terms. This return to two-term presidencies between 1980 and 2012 came as a direct contrast to the period between 1960 and 1980 when none of the five presidents managed to complete two full terms and only one—!Richard Nixon—managed to get himself reelected.

We saw in our first volume that the processes for nominating and electing presidents continued to undergo some significant changes during the last two decades of the twentieth century: the number of primaries increased significantly; there was a tendency toward “front loading”; Super Tuesday was established; superdelegates were introduced; national party conventions declined in importance; and presidential debates became an established part of the presidential campaign. Further changes occurred during the first decade of the twenty-first century most notably in the use of new media. But what changed most significantly was the increasingly partisan atmosphere in which presidential elections came to be fought. This was to have significant implications for the way in which candidates won their nominations as well as for the conduct of the general election campaign.

But first, as in our first volume, a brief synopsis of the system as it had developed by 2000 and as it continued to develop through the first four elections of this new century.
Frequency of Elections

Presidential elections are held every four years in years divisible by four. This is required by the Constitution in Article II Section 1 and could be changed or varied only by constitutional amendment. Thus whereas Britain had no general election during World War II—there was none between 1935 and 1945—the United States continued to hold its elections right through the war years, including a presidential election in 1944. Federal law fixes the election date as the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Thus the election falls any time between the second and the eighth of that month.

Constitutional Requirements

Article II Section 1 also lays down three requirements that a president must fulfill. First, the president must be a natural born citizen of the United States. There were some scurrilous charges that Barack Obama did not qualify on these grounds. Billboards appeared at roadsides saying simply “Where’s the Birth Certificate?” The “birther movement” called for Obama to release his official birth certificate, which he did in 2008. But rumors and accusations still persisted, leading to Obama’s release of his long-form birth certificate in April 2011. Second, the Constitution states that the president must be at least 35 years old. Our period of study includes the fifth youngest president, Barack Obama, at the age of 47. Finally, Article II states that the president must have been resident in the United States for at least 14 years.

Since the passage of the Twenty-Second Amendment in 1951 presidents are now limited to serving only two terms in office. This had applied to two presidents before our period of study—Eisenhower (1960) and Reagan (1988)—and to Clinton (2000) and George W. Bush (2008) during this period. Presuming that Barack Obama completes his second term, he will be ineligible for reelection in 2016. If a president comes to office between elections and he serves more than half of the term to which his predecessor was elected, that counts as his first term. If, however, he serves less than half of his predecessor’s term, he would be eligible for election to two full terms in his own right. Thus Gerald Ford who served the last two-and-a-half years of Nixon’s second term would have been eligible for election only once. Lyndon Johnson, on the other hand, who served only just over one year of Kennedy’s term was elected in his own right to a full term in 1964 and could have been reelected in 1968.

The Process of Candidate Selection

The process for choosing presidential candidates had evolved significantly over the last three decades of the twentieth century. The most significant