Chapter 6

Nominations and Elections in an Era of Partisanship

Presidential elections tend to come in phases. We began the first volume of this series on *The Pursuit of the Presidency* by pointing out that of the twelve elections held in the period from 1932 through 1976 the Democrats won eight and the Republicans just four and that of the six presidents elected during this period, only two of them were Republicans. In only three of these twelve elections did the Republican candidate win more than 50 percent of the vote, whilst the Democrats averaged 50 percent. In terms of the electoral vote, the Democrats averaged 302 whilst the Republicans averaged only 222. In the next seven elections, those held from 1980 through 2004, everything changed. Of these seven elections, the Republicans won five, elected three different presidents, won more than 50 percent of the vote on four occasions, and averaged 332 electoral votes. The Democrats, meanwhile, won only two of these 7 elections, elected only one president, failed to win 50 percent of the vote in any of them, and averaged only 206 electoral votes. In 2008, the tables seemed to turn once again to the extent that following the 2012 election commentators were suggesting that there was for the present at least a Democratic lock on the Electoral College whilst the GOP was doomed to destruction unless it radically altered its policies and appeal. Time will tell whether or not such forecasts are accurate.

Much else changed during the period covered by the nine elections in these two volumes—those from 1980 through 2012—and these changes affected both the way in which presidential candidates were selected, the way in which presidents were elected, and indeed the presidency itself. In 1980, the Iowa caucuses were held on January 21 and the New Hampshire primary on February 26. Only 3 Democratic and 5 Republican contests
were held before March. Over 20 contests were held by both parties between May 3 and June 3. There was no Super Tuesday, and no front loading. The “invisible primary” was for the most part what it said it was—invisible. By 2008, the Iowa caucuses were held on January 3 and the New Hampshire primary on January 8. There were 36 Republican and 37 Democratic contests before the beginning of March. Both parties held fewer than 10 contests in May and June. Super Tuesday on February 5 featured 21 Republican and 22 Democratic contests. The invisible primary was highly visible with its interminable intraparty televised debates. By 2012, the tide had turned back a little in certain respects so that the nomination calendar more resembled 2004 rather than a further advance on 2008. But the invisible primary was still highly visible.

The nomination process had further changed in the period between 1980 and 2012 in that the national party conventions had lost even more of their significance and prominence. Having lost the function of choosing the presidential candidates to the primaries, the conventions gradually lost the function of choosing the vice presidential candidates. When in 1996 Bob Dole introduced his VP candidate Jack Kemp the day before the start of his convention, the Republicans had finally broken with the tradition of announcing the running mate during the convention, a tradition that the Democrats had abandoned back in 1984.

There were changes too to the electoral process during this period. The televised debates finally became a mandatory part of the campaign formalized by the setting up of the Commission on Presidential Debates in 1987. During this period, a pattern would be formalized for three presidential and one vice presidential debates to be staged during each election cycle. New formats would be developed including the town hall style in 1992 and the round table style in 2000. Developments occurred too to make the debates at which the candidates stand at podiums more conversational. In the first debate in 2012, moderator Jim Lehrer went further than anyone had done before in encouraging the two candidates to debate with each other rather than merely directing their answers back to the moderator. Significant changes occurred too in campaign finance. The use of so-called matching funds, the bread and butter of presidential campaign funds for three decades, had all but died out by 2012. New rules were brought in by the McCain-Feingold legislation of 2002, and then there were the implications of the Supreme Court’s decisions in 2010 in the cases of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission and SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission. New terminology came into the election lexicon with 527 groups and Super PACs.

In terms of building those winning coalitions of which we spoke in volume one, there was both change and continuity. As Table 6.1 shows, both