Chapter Six

The Chosen Ones: Presidential Appointees

Although the Constitution designates the vice president as the heir apparent, in practice during the early years of the republic, the individual second to the president in power was the secretary of state. As a result, for many years, the secretary of state was presumed to be the next in line to be elected president. Indeed, all of the presidents from Thomas Jefferson to John Quincy Adams had previously served as secretary of state. This presumption may have been based on the significant national-level experience the secretary of state gained within the executive branch. But it is equally plausible that their initial appointment as secretary of state was an acknowledgment that they had already proven their merit through their previous years of public service. Many presidents come to office after serving in national offices to which they were appointed by previous chief executives. Sometimes these appointments were to cabinet-level offices; sometimes, to subcabinet or agency positions; and sometimes, in diplomatic positions. The question for this chapter is how well such appointees perform as president.

Widening the Doors after Nomination Reform

Whereas many states elect both governors and other top-level executives, at the national level, presidents appoint such executives. The difference in the selection process reflects two different criteria for merit. At the state level, the assumption is that the people are best fit to choose their leaders. At the national level, the assumption is that the president is best fit to choose the most meritorious individual who will also work in the president’s interest. This difference raises the question of whether the public or elites are best fit to choose governmental leaders.
The same question was raised in connection with the 1968 Democratic National Convention. For years the selection of party nominees had been controlled by party elites in the convention system. The 1968 convention witnessed calls by party rank-and-file for more democratic control of the process. With increasing involvement in Vietnam, the broadening of the Civil Rights Movement, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, 1968 was a turbulent year. Demonstrators took their dissatisfaction with the Johnson administration to the Chicago streets surrounding the Democratic National Convention. Their unhappiness with the Vietnam War was exacerbated by their discontent that Johnson’s heir apparent, Hubert Humphrey, would be getting the nomination for president without competing in any presidential primaries. Since the heyday of the Progressive Movement, states had moved back to choosing their delegates through conventions. As a result, whereas in 1920 20 states had chosen delegates through primary elections, in 1968 only 14 states still held primaries. Four had supported Robert Kennedy before his death; six, Senator Eugene McCarthy (an antiwar candidate from Minnesota); one, President Johnson before his withdrawal from the race; and three had voted for favorite son candidates who were expected to support Humphrey at the convention. Humphrey had focused his efforts on the convention states where party leaders could control their delegates. After Kennedy’s assassination, had his delegates moved en masse to the McCarthy camp, an antiwar candidate would have won the nomination. But instead, Kennedy’s delegates split their support between McCarthy and Senator George McGovern (South Dakota), which meant that Humphrey had the plurality of the vote coming into the convention and eventually won the nomination. The convention ended with calls for reform so that the policies of nominees would be more in line with the preferences of rank-and-file party members.

After Nixon won the election in the fall, the Democratic Party chair established a committee, headed by George McGovern initially and Representative Donald Fraser later, charged with making recommendations on how to make the nominating process more representative. These reforms acted on many fronts. One important change was the elimination of the unit rule. Previously, some states had cast all of their votes for a single candidate. One consequence had been that candidates would only compete in states where they had a chance of winning. The elimination of the unit rule meant that candidates ran in more states in hopes of getting at least some delegates. Second, voters cast their ballots for presidential candidates rather than