Chapter Seven

The Business of the Presidency: Nonpolitical Experience

During the 2012 presidential election, the campaigns of both Herman Cain and Mitt Romney claimed special preparation for the presidency on the basis of their prior business experience. Both campaigns made two claims: first, their prior administrative experiences prepared them in a unique way to be the administrator-in-chief of the United States; and second, their business experience helped them understand the economy better than their competitors with only political experience. In this chapter, I address whether those presidents with prior business experience actually have been better prepared to perform well once in office.

Front-Loading the Nominating Process

Candidates with business experience have found a special niche in the modern nominating process. Campaigns have become increasingly expensive at the same time that changes in party rules have given an advantage to candidates who have ready access to funding early in the campaign. After the adoption of the McGovern-Fraser Commission recommendations by the Democratic Party, further formal and informal changes were made to the nominating process. For example, in response to criticisms that the process was insufficiently responsive to party elite, the Democratic Party now invites “super delegates” (elected officials) to the convention. The parties have also adopted rules to respond to the propensity of states to move their event to the front of the nominating calendar. But even with these rules, the outcome of the nominating process is dominated by its front-loaded calendar.

In 1980, the Democratic Party established the Hunt Commission to deal with the undesirable side effects of the McGovern-Fraser reforms. The goal of the commission was to increase the likelihood that presidential nominees would both be elected and be able to
govern well. One concern was that the increased use of primaries had meant that party elites were less likely to be delegates to the national convention. From the commission’s perspective, party leaders and elected officials had been more focused on the long-term value of party building than current delegates who were elected solely for their commitment to a particular candidate. As a result, the commission recommended that the party begin making seats available to party elites—such as governors, members of Congress, and state party chairs. As unpledged delegates, these leaders could moderate party extremism and potentially provide leadership during a convention in deadlock. Since 1984 when the recommendation was adopted, the number of superdelegates has varied between 15 to 20 percent of the total delegates at the Democratic National Convention. Republican use of unpledged delegates is much more limited; they allowed three per state in 2012. In 2008, neither dominant Democratic candidate was able to achieve a definitive majority of the pledged delegates to the convention. As a result, superdelegates proved pivotal to that nomination. But ultimately they bowed to popular opinion and supported the popular candidate, Obama, rather than the presumptive party insider, Clinton.

One side-effect of the reforms that was not yet apparent in 1980 was the problem of front-loading. During the campaign cycle that emerged from the reforms, it became very clear that Iowa, with its status as the first caucus of the nominating season, and New Hampshire, with its status as the first primary, had an impact on the eventual choice of the nominee that was out of proportion to their number of delegates. To share in that influence, other states began moving their contests up to the front of the calendar. Initially such movement took the form of a coordination of elections. In 1988, Governor Charles Robb (Virginia) choreographed the first Super Tuesday. Fourteen southern and border states (as well as Massachusetts and Rhode Island) held their primaries on the same day early in the calendar in hopes of pushing the selection of a moderate candidate. Michael Dukakis was able to take advantage of that situation: By winning the two most populous states in the south (Texas and Florida), as well as the two northern states, he gained the momentum he needed to win the nomination. More in line with the intention of Super Tuesday, southerner George Bush swept the Republican contests in the south and went on to win the nomination and election in 1988. Similarly, in 1992, Bill Clinton used Super Tuesday to overcome his New Hampshire loss and advance to the presidency. In 2008, western states initially negotiated to form their own regional primary day, although it ended up being a bigger