

CHAPTER II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

Elections of 1789 to 1820

During the infancy of presidential elections, most American citizens were not involved in the selection of the nation's leader. The various ways in which state legislatures implemented the electoral college system meant that the individual voters were often denied the opportunity to participate directly in presidential politics.¹ Adult male citizens often had to meet property qualifications or satisfy other conditions in order to be eligible to vote when the right to select electors was granted to the general public by their respective state legislators.² The average citizen was even further removed from the presidential selection process because candidates for the office were chosen through informal and formal meetings or "caucuses" of congressional or party leaders.³

In Maryland, citizen involvement exceeded that of most other states as presidential electors were always chosen in a direct election by eligible voters. Universal suffrage for adult, white males was achieved relatively early in Maryland with the elimination of property qualifications in 1802.⁴ During the period of 1789 to 1820, Maryland also benefitted from partisan political activity which enlivened the presidential election contests. Although Marylanders did have the opportunity to participate in presidential politics, those elections did not attract the voter turnout or enthusiasm generated by contests for the state legislature or U.S. House of Representatives during this era.⁵

Maryland was the geographic and population center of the United States in 1790 and 1800 and the location of the nation's capital along the banks of the Potomac River appears to have been a logical choice.⁶ Closeness to the seat of government, along with the development of the port of Baltimore, made Marylanders conscious of national and international affairs. The press in Maryland reported on these matters on a regular and detailed basis and played a significant role in fostering partisan debate. Maryland was also linked to the national government by the appointment of its own political leaders to positions in the early presidential administrations.⁷

The election returns from 1789 to 1820 are interesting and informative. This period began and ended with no contest for the office of president and the low vote totals for 1792 and 1820 reflect this fact. In the intervening years partisan politics was often heated and the development of political parties nurtured. Notwithstanding the efforts of President Washington to avoid conflicts in the operation of the government, factions developed early in Congress and grew into discernible parties by the presidential election of 1796. The political divisions between creditor and debtor interests which appeared in the post-Revolutionary War period ripened into a political split between the mercantile/business interests whose leaders were generally identified as "Federalists" and the planter/farmer interests whose leaders were identified as "Jeffersonians,"