The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act

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Introduction

In July 1881, President James A. Garfield was shot by Charles Guiteau. On September 19, tragically he passed away because doctors were unable to find and remove the bullet. Guiteau’s assassination attempt on President Garfield’s life was due to believing that his death would be a political necessity for the Stalwarts conservative faction to return to power, which was represented by Vice President Chester A. Arthur. President Garfield’s assassination caused a widespread civil service reform to sweep the nation known as The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883. During the era, the civil service was given to any friend or family of a candidate that won political office, it was called the Patronage system or the Spoils system. Once the president’s death occurred the public wanted to do away with this system and replace it with the Merit system. With the new system, those in office would need to be qualified for the position and once a new political candidate was elected into office their jobs would still be secured regardless of the candidates. This one-act framed modern America's civil service system as we know it today. One can say that the Pendleton Act, the events that lead to pushing it through congress, the civil services systems before the reform, and how it shaped today's modern government is essential knowledge for any Public Administrator.

Literature Review

The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 was predominantly based on reforms proposed by the Jay commission and also expanded on similar civil service reforms attempted 30 years earlier by President Franklin Pierce (Karabell, 2004). The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act “required that a limited portion of the civil service referred to as the classified service, be selected by competitive examination. The new system was called the merit system” (Hoogenboom, p. 302, 1959). To reiterate, The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 decreased the number of government positions that could be obtained through ties to politicians. Also, The Pendleton Act made it illegal to fire or demote some government officials based on political reasons. Lastly, overseen by the United States Civil Service Commission, the law also removed the fees that political appointees were expected to pay as the price for their appointments.

In 1881, frustrated job seeker Charles J. Guiteau assassinated President James A. Garfield. This was due to Mr. Guiteau's belief that he was denied a government position due to his position as a Stalwart or conservative Republican. Mr. Guiteau expected that, after the death of President Garfield, vice president Chester A. Arthur would reinforce the spoils system. Unexpectedly, during President Arthur’s first annual address to Congress, the President petitioned civil service reform legislation. Unfortunately, The Pendleton Bill, having already been introduced before by Democratic Senator George H. Pendleton of Ohio, was once again rejected by Congress. However, “Democrats, campaigning on the reform issue, won control of the House of Representatives in the 1882 congressional elections” (Doenecke, 1981 & Karabell, 2004).

In turn, the Republicans suffered a disastrous loss in the 1882 elections. This event convinced many Republicans, who wanted to pass a bill so that they could craft the legislation before losing control of Congress, to support the civil service reform. As a result, the Republican congress was driven to approve the civil service reform legislation of 1883. In the end, the assassination of President Garfield was the initial event that encouraged reformers' attempts. However, the Republican Congress determined that its power may be about to end which also added momentum to the reform. Accordingly, after the midterm elections, “the outgoing Republican Congress passed an act drafted by Dorman Bridgman Eaton, secretary of the National Civil Service Reform League, and sponsored by Democratic senator George Hunt Pendleton of Ohio” (Trotter & Pilver, 2019).

Since the 1830s, presidents had appointed political positions based on political support rather than personal excellence. This process meant that in “return for appointments, these appointees were charged with raising campaign funds and bolstering the popularity of the president and the party in their communities” which became known as the Spoils system (Theriault, 2003). Beginning in 1829, when Andrew Jackson became president, he regulated under the belief that most government jobs could be done without special training and both the “common man” and the wealthy had equal rights to said government jobs. However, while President Jackson democratized the civil service, he also condoned the spoils system. This type of sponsorship became a “key issue in elections, as many partisans in both major parties were more concerned about control over political appointments than they were about policy issues” (Theriault, 2003). In turn, by the 1880s, even though there was a great increase in public jobs there was a large decrease in the quality of those serving in them.

Opposite to the spoils system emerged the merit system brought about by The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act 1883. However, this was certainly not the first time such a system was in place. The merit system was originally initiated by George Washington when he was president. It was so that “persons of high competence and integrity should be sought to fill public service jobs. This approach resulted in a stable and fairly skilled workforce but contributed to its elite quality” (Trotter & Pilver, 2019). Later, in 1865, Republican Congressman Thomas Allen Jenckes would initiate the first serious attempt to reform the system which would encourage the formation of organized reform groups around the country.

When comparing the spoils system to the merit system, one can see the difference in the underlying interests of the representatives. The spoils system is tantamount to the saying "to the victor belong the spoils,” which was used by New York Senator William L. Marcy about the victory of Andrew Jackson in the election of 1828. The saying was used to describe the process in which the victorious political party would then have the right to give government civil service jobs to their supporters, friends, and relatives as rewards and as an impetus to keep working for the party. Contradictorily, the merit system, which may not always lead to the choosing of the most competent candidate is still paramount to eliminating the most incompetent candidates. This was largely due to the purpose of the merit system that was meant to promote and hire government employees based on their ability to perform a job rather than on their political sponsors.

After the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act 1883 was passed, the merit system was adopted at not only the federal level but also in some of the sates. When the act was first passed, it only covered about “10 percent of the Government’s 132,000 employees” (“Our Documents - Pendleton Act (1883),” 2019). However, during his first term, President Grover Cleveland chose to expand the number of federal positions that were subject to the merit system. Between 1885 and 1897, the total percent of federal employees protected by the Pendleton Act rose to forty percent (Welch, 1988). In retrospect, the law also caused major changed in campaign finance because “parties were forced to look for new sources of campaign funds, such as wealthy donors” (White & And, 2017). Also, in this day and age, more than 90 percent of the 2.7 million federal employees are covered under the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act.

Nonetheless, an important question remains and that is, did the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act change the federal system for the better? Through the years, legislation has been added to improve upon the civil service system. For example, the Classification Act of 1923 provided uniformity throughout the federal system. As well as, the Hatch Political Activities Act of 1939 that restricted national service workers from taking an active part in politics (Trotter & Pilver, 2019). Besides, when merit is genuinely appraised during the hiring or promoting process then federal agencies can "provide the people of the United States with a competent, honest, and productive workforce” (“Merit System Principles and Performance Management,” 2019).

Conclusion

The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act 1883 was triggered by the assassination of President James A. Garfield in 1881. The Pendleton Act is a “federal law passed in 1883 reforming the civil service and establishing the United States Civil Service Commission” (“Our Documents - Pendleton Act (1883),” 2019). The purpose of the law was to “to eliminate political influence from administrative agencies and to ensure more competent government employees” (Trotter &Pilver, 2019). In other words, it would establish the merit system which required that a limited section of civil service employees be selected by competitive examination. In turn, this would replace the spoils system that allowed the victorious political party to bestow appointments to relatives, friends, and supporters regardless of their qualifications. And so, “the spoils system gradually disappeared—at least as an acknowledged or accepted practice—at all levels of American governance” (Trotter & Pilver, 2019). Thus, causing a positive ripple effect across various levels in the country which would help lead to a more structured and stable workplace that will, in turn, provide good quality work to the public.

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