

The Rockefeller Era: 1958-1966

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During the spring and summer of 2010, I completed research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) for my dissertation with the support of the Grant-in-Aid program. My dissertation, “Rockefeller’s New York, Rockefeller’s Republicans: A Study of the Republican Party from Albany, NY to Washington, D.C., 1958-1976” examines the moderate to liberal Republican tradition in a period most often associated with the “conservative turn” in the Republican Party. Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller was a controversial figure from his earliest years as governor of New York through his tenure as Vice President under Gerald Ford. This study seeks to put the voters of New York and the nation in conversation with a politician who tested the boundaries of his own party and diverse groups’ conceptions of liberalism and the New Deal consensus. By focusing on the political choices of Rockefeller and the public’s reception to various policies he forwarded, this project seeks to identify the fundamental commitments of moderate Republicanism in the wake of the social and economic upheaval of the 1960s and the subsequent realignment of American politics.

For nearly twenty years, histories of the Republican Party in the twentieth century have been concerned with the party’s conservative turn at mid-century. These histories—which focus on the political ascendancy of the South and West, suburban politics, and conservative icons such as Barry Goldwater—pay little attention to the party’s tradition of moderate and liberal Republicanism. Scholars of this era state that Nelson Rockefeller, who entered elected politics in 1958, represented the antithesis of this newly surging conservative movement out of the Sunbelt,

but do little to explore such assertions. It is unclear in such narratives what happened to the Republican politicians, sometimes known as “Rockefeller Republicans,” who had invested themselves in a more moderate brand of politics. As for Rockefeller – his advocates called him a master politician and pragmatist, while his opponents in New York called him a tabula rasa who could be neither liberal nor conservative. Conservative Republicans nationally described him as the worst of the “me-too” liberal Republicans who advocated intrusive and wasteful government alongside Democrats. The numerous interpretations of Rockefeller’s political ideology and legacy begin to reveal a complicated story about a politician whose reputation often preceded him, but who remains difficult to brand with traditional labels.

The research I completed at the Rockefeller Archive Center provided the foundation for the first half of my dissertation, which explores Nelson Rockefeller’s entrance into electoral politics and his immediate influence as a man who many thought was destined to become president. Some of the most significant events in this period include Rockefeller’s landslide victory over Governor W. Averell Harriman in 1958, his participation in the reshaping of the 1960 Republican Party Platform and his polarizing bid for the Republican presidential nomination against Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964. This is a period I refer to as “The Rockefeller Era,” when Governor Rockefeller, New York State, and the nation basked in the great prosperity and optimism of a postwar society that would soon begin to falter in the face of the social and economic turmoil of the 1960s. The Rockefeller Archive Center, as the repository for Nelson Rockefeller’s personal, gubernatorial, and vice presidential papers, provides unique coverage of one of New York’s most influential governors. This is magnified by New York State’s lack of legislation requiring governors to turn over their papers, which often results in the destruction of innumerable documents in the final months of a governor’s time in office. Series, such as the “Hugh Morrow Interviews” and “Politics, 1935-1976” both in Record Group 4,

provide access to Governor Rockefeller's worldview from the perspective of some of his closet associates, political strategies, and campaign materials from his various campaigns.

My dissertation is a political study that uses Nelson Rockefeller's career as a lens for understanding the political culture of New York and the nation more broadly. By tracing Rockefeller's interaction with the New York State Republican Party and the state's Conservative Party, which became active in 1962, it becomes possible to understand his own ideological commitments in relation to those of the state's Republicans and conservatives. The New York State Republican Party had a reputation with Republicans across the nation for leading the moderate to liberal wing of the party and the nomination of Rockefeller for governor would have only cemented that reputation. The reality, however, was that Rockefeller and many Republicans from New York City and its suburbs were a minority within the state party that drew most of its strength from upstate conservatives. Examining the internal dynamics of the state party, while considering Rockefeller's greatest strength – his ability to build a voting base that crossed party lines – provides important insight into Rockefeller's role at the party's helm. Polls and surveys commissioned by Rockefeller to examine the political and social dynamics of New York (in "Sub-series 4, Polls, 1958-1972" within the "Politics, 1935-1976" series in Record Group 4) provide a unique look into New York and its voters, offering exciting materials for researchers. I have found a range of materials that allow me to explore key political issues in New York and trace the development of policies such as welfare reform and illegal narcotics legislation throughout Rockefeller's tenure. Series, such as "DNA, 1958-1968" in Record Group 4 and "Speeches, 1958-1973" and "Issue Books, 1959-1964" in Record Group 15 allow me to consider public reception to various laws and issues based on how Rockefeller and his assistants chose to present his initiatives and perspectives over time.

Exploring Nelson Rockefeller's activities within the national Republican Party, including his crusade to determine the Republican Party platform in 1960 and his yearlong campaign for

the presidential nomination leading up to the Republican National Convention in 1964, allow me to extend the scope of my dissertation beyond New York. These episodes reveal the difficulties Rockefeller faced as the presumed leader of the liberal faction of the party, but whose supporters were often difficult to organize and less vocal than conservative supporters of Barry Goldwater. The research I have completed at the RAC has enabled me to challenge popular understandings of moderate to liberal Republicanism in this period. Furthermore, the wealth of information I found on Rockefeller's activism relating to the struggle for civil rights in America has encouraged me to incorporate an extended discussion of this issue that will also serve as an organizing principle for the first half of my dissertation. There are several series that speak to Rockefeller's presidential aspirations, but a couple that were extremely helpful for my work include the "George L. Hinman Files, 1959-1970" which are a sub-series of the "Politics, 1935-1976" series and the "Ann C. Whitman, Politics, 1958-1973" series.

At present, I am still conducting research for the sections of my dissertation I have discussed here, but the Rockefeller Archive Center's Grant-in-Aid made it possible for me to immerse myself in the vast Nelson A. Rockefeller papers, a process that was essential to completing my dissertation. The work I completed was fundamental for my dissertation and I look forward to resuming my research at the RAC in the near future. The remaining research I must complete pertains to Rockefeller's third and fourth gubernatorial terms and his tenure as Vice President.

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