

Winthrop Rockefeller: Arkansas Politics

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In April 2009 I conducted research on the Winthrop Rockefeller Papers held at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) on microfilm with the help of a grant-in-aid. My research, following on from my extensive body of previous publications on the civil rights movement in Arkansas, sought to examine the impact that Winthrop Rockefeller had on race relations in the state as governor between 1967 and 1971. The rich collection of material I discovered expanded my focus to the larger project of writing the first full-length biography of Winthrop Rockefeller. In August 2009 I trod the boards in the newly renovated suite of offices at the RAC as the first scholar-in-residence to work there.

My research on both visits to the RAC yielded much valuable information for my biography. The first fruits of this work were presented at the Third Annual Winthrop Rockefeller Legacy Weekend held at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute (WRI) on Petit Jean Mountain, just outside Morrilton, Arkansas, April 30-May 1, 2010. The WRI, part of the University of Arkansas system, is built on the site of Winthrop Rockefeller's Winrock Farms which he set up when he moved to Arkansas from New York in 1953. It has now been converted into a state-of-the-art conference centre and museum.

Appropriately enough given the nature of my initial research, the conference focused on Rockefeller's impact on racial and social justice in the state. The conference was attended by Rockefeller family members, people who knew and worked with Winthrop Rockefeller both on his farm and in his political campaigns, and numerous other dignitaries. In the event, my talk turned out to be something of an inaugural lecture since, in an instance of life imitating art, over the summer of 2010 I will be leaving my current position as professor of U.S. history at Royal Holloway, University of London, England, to take up a new post as chair of department and Donaghey professor of history at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock (UALR). This will mean following in Winthrop Rockefeller's footsteps to Arkansas as well as working at an institution which he proudly brought into the University of Arkansas system in 1969 while governor.

The essay below is drawn from my talk at the WRI and is based on the research I conducted at the RAC. It forms part of a longer piece which is due to appear in an essay collection on *How, When and Why the South went Republican*, edited by Glenn Feldman, forthcoming from the University Press of Florida in 2011.

Winthrop Rockefeller's seven-year residency qualification to run for governor of Arkansas had been fulfilled by 1960 and this caused some consternation in the South. Louisiana newspaper the *Monroe World* ran an article that began: "The noisiest, struttingest and presumably richest northern 'Yankee' liberal in Arkansas--Winthrop Rockefeller--is being talked of as a possible candidate for governor of that state." The article concluded: "If a northern-born 'liberal' integrationist were to be elected governor of a deep-south, conservative, segregationist state it would be the biggest overnight about-face in the history of the United States, if not the entire world."

Less than seven years later, on January 10, 1967, Winthrop Rockefeller was sworn in as governor of Arkansas. He became the first Republican governor of the state in almost a century and only the sixth Republican governor of any former confederate state since Reconstruction.

One of the biggest fears about Rockefeller's election was its potential impact on race relations. Rockefeller's decision to place his old friend from Harlem, African American private detective Jimmy Hudson in charge of running day-to-day matters at his Winrock Farms, raised more than a few eyebrows, but for Rockefeller this was simply a continuation of a racially moderate outlook which had been nurtured since childhood. As a youngster, Winthrop spent holidays with his family on campus at Virginia's African American Hampton Institute where he mixed freely with African American students. In 1940, he became a trustee of the National Urban League, a civil rights organization dedicated to addressing the urban problems and needs of African Americans. This continued the Rockefeller family's ongoing interest in and financial support for the organization.

Winthrop's racial moderation followed him to Arkansas. In 1968, after the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., Rockefeller was the only southern governor to arrange a memorial service on the grounds of the state capitol to dissipate racial tensions. The following year he appointed William "Sonny" Walker as the South's only African American head of a state War on Poverty agency, the Arkansas Office of Economic Opportunity. Many more minority appointments followed during his two terms in office.

African American votes proved crucial to Rockefeller's breakthrough 1966 election as governor. In 1964, Rockefeller had been defeated in the gubernatorial election by incumbent Orval Faubus. Faubus received 84 per cent of the African American vote. This seemed an unlikely figure, not least because Faubus had famously garnered international headlines when he called out the

Arkansas National Guard to prevent the integration of Little Rock's Central High School in September 1957. In part, the African American vote for Faubus can be explained by his ongoing efforts to shrewdly cultivate established leaders in the African American community. In part, it was down to the limited number of existing African American voters due to voter registration obstacles such as the poll tax. And in part, it was because of outright corruption. Little Rock attorney Edwin Dunaway worked for Rockefeller in the 1966 campaign in the most densely populated African American area of the state, the Arkansas Delta. He recalled scenes in previous elections in the Delta when white planters on election-day loaded up their African American tenants in a truck, took them to the polls, and, as Dunaway put it, "voted them"--that is, under duress, forced them to exercise a bloc vote for the white planter's preferred candidate.

Developments at local, state, regional, and national levels contributed toward significant changes in the African American vote in 1966. In 1962, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) set up operations in Little Rock and by the summer of 1963 it was beginning to mobilize African American communities in the Arkansas Delta. Other groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Council on Community Affairs (COCA), an African American leadership organization based in Little Rock, and a "Democrats for Rockefeller" organization, made up largely of white liberal Arkansas Democrats who opposed Rockefeller's Democratic opponent Jim Johnson, also played important roles in turning out the African American vote. Rockefeller's campaign built on the groundwork already done by these organizations.

Changes to the voter registration law helped to increase the number of African American voters. In 1964, the passage of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawed the use of the poll tax in federal elections. In 1965, Arkansas abolished the poll tax as a requirement for voting and introduced a permanent personal voter registration system. This new voter registration system simply required a free, one-off registration to vote that in most cases lasted a lifetime. Qualifying to vote therefore became much easier and the number of African American and white electors in Arkansas rose rapidly.

Race played an absolutely central role to the outcome of the 1966 gubernatorial election. Rockefeller was understood to be the more progressive candidate on race since it was quite clear where his opponent Jim Johnson stood. Johnson was the former president of the Associated Citizens' Councils of Arkansas, an organization which was in the vanguard of opposition to school desegregation after the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision. If anyone doubted Johnson's segregationist credentials, he soon made it plain early on in the campaign when he refused to shake hands with African Americans, declaring that he "did not campaign in their community." Though Johnson later recanted, realizing that he would have to move beyond his white conservative base in the state to win the election, the damage was already done.

The increasing racial tensions and violence in the United States in the mid- to late-1960s meant that Arkansas voters were ever more concerned about what would happen in their state. Voters were unsure about Jim Johnson's ability to handle such disturbances without further fanning the flames of racial discord. In 1964, Faubus had easily outscored Rockefeller among voters when asked who could best keep the racial peace. In 1966, voters who were asked the same question went for Rockefeller over Johnson by a three-to-one margin. As Rockefeller later reflected, "The reckless course of white supremacy at any cost was running out of appeal; it was losing its credibility with the people."

Nevertheless, Rockefeller still had much to do in a dyed-in-the-wool conservative, predominantly Democratic state. Irene Samuel, another person who played a key role in mobilizing the African American vote for Rockefeller in 1966, noted the important shift that had taken place since 1964. Rockefeller won the 1966 election by 306,324 to 257, 203 votes, a margin of just 49,121 votes. Overall, Samuel estimated that Rockefeller narrowly lost to Johnson on white votes alone by about 18,000 votes. But this time around, Rockefeller claimed at least 67,000 more African American votes than his opponent, enough to make up the winning margin. Two years later in 1968, when Rockefeller was re-elected as governor, he polled 88 per cent of the state's African American vote.

Rockefeller's four years as governor marked an important sea-change in Arkansas politics. Before the Democrats recaptured the office in 1971 they undertook a thorough examination of their ideas and priorities. No longer would they consider a segregationist candidate like Jim Johnson. The successful Democrat who ousted Rockefeller in the 1970 election, Dale Bumpers, was the first in a line of Democrat governors of Arkansas to embrace new racially enlightened ideals and to make open and active efforts to legitimately court the African American vote. When Bumpers was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1975 he was succeeded in the governor's mansion by David Pryor. In 1979, Pryor, in turn, was elected to the U.S. Senate, replacing Arkansas's last senior old-guard segregationist politician, John McClellan. Pryor was succeeded as governor by Bill Clinton, who went on to win the White House for the Democrats in 1992.

It is no small irony that Arkansas's first Republican governor of the twentieth century, a man who dramatically changed race relations and politics in the state, ultimately ended up benefitting the Democrats the most. But Rockefeller was not perturbed by this. His main aim was less to promote die-hard partisanship and more to change the state for the better. As he once wrote, "If I had found Arkansas under almost a hundred years of Republican domination with the political stagnation just as bad, I very probably would have set out to reorganize a Democratic Party in Arkansas."

Rockefeller's Democratic beneficiaries have been quick to acknowledge their debt to him. Bill Clinton admits that, "Winthrop Rockefeller's governorship blurred traditional party distinctions,

and with his inauguration came a new era in Arkansas politics." Put simply, if it had not been for Winthrop Rockefeller's victory in 1966, there may well not have been a Clinton presidency in the 1990s. In his autobiography Dale Bumpers remembers Rockefeller's election as "the dawn of a new day." Most poignantly, David Pryor has noted, summing up the extent of Rockefeller's colossal impact in Arkansas, that he, "extended a greater--and more beneficial--influence on a single state than any figure of his generation."

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