

Debating Family Values: Women, Grassroots Politics, and the New Right

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My dissertation, "Debating Family Values: Women, Grassroots Politics, and the New Right," examines how a conservative definition of "family values" became ascendant in American politics and policy-making. I examined New York State in the 1970s and 1980s when feminist activism and an emerging conservative family values movement competed side-by-side to define the family. Relating local events to national political realignment, I illustrate how conservative activist, led by suburban women, shifted party politics to the right – especially by concentrating on issues such as abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and state-subsidized daycare.

Given my topic, I was drawn to the Nelson A. Rockefeller papers at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The core of my dissertation is about political party transformation in New York, and also the nation. Specifically, I explored how the success of the family values movement marked the ultimate end of the postwar liberal consensus – a political consensus that had been under assault (especially in the GOP) since the Goldwater movement of the early 1960s. In New York, that shift was particularly dramatic in the 1970s and 1980s, when the long era of liberal

Republicanism there ended in support of conservative Republicans like Al D'Amato and Ronald Reagan. Since the era of postwar liberal Republicanism (or “Rockefeller Republicanism”) in New York is most closely associated with Nelson Rockefeller’s gubernatorial rule, his papers are essential to my project.

While at the Archive Center, I focused on the Rockefeller Family Archives, Record Group 15, Series 24: Nelson Rockefeller’s gubernatorial political files. Within this series, I found material related to legalizing abortion in New York in 1970, daycare proposals, and similar legislation aimed at women, such as equal pay proposals and support for the Equal Rights Amendments (ERA). This material will supplement archival research I have conducted elsewhere on New York politicians and women’s groups (e.g., the papers of Jacob Javits, Karen Burstein, Bella Abzug, NOW-New York, etc.) Collectively, this information will support chapter one of my dissertation, which highlights how Rockefeller’s moderate-to-liberal GOP faction frequently cooperated with feminist groups and Democratic politicians to propose positive legislation aimed at women – notably, the 1970 abortion liberalization law.

Within Governor Rockefeller’s gubernatorial files in Record Group 15, I also found materials documenting a lack of support for abortion – notably a “minority report” filed by anti-choice members of the 1968 Governor’s Committee to Study Abortion. Such information will compliment research I have done at other archives and the oral histories I have conducted. These materials will greatly strengthen my first chapter (which also discusses the New York State Right to Life Party) and second chapter (about the defeat of a state-level ERA referendum in 1975). These chapters will collectively demonstrate how conservative suburban women, all of whom felt part of a larger family values movement, successfully branded the issues discussed in chapter one (and the women supporting such causes) as “anti-family.”