

African American Civil Rights and the Republican Party

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Historians and other scholars interested in the politics of the African American freedom struggle since World War II have tended to concentrate on Democratic leaders such as Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson. The role of the Republican party on racial matters, however, has not received nearly as much attention despite widespread agreement that race has played a significant role in the success of the Republican party since the 1960s. My study aims to broaden understanding of the politics and policy of race since World War II by looking directly at how the Republican party approached civil rights and racial matters regarding African Americans.

By 1945, African Americans had completed their shift to the Democratic party, at least on the presidential level. Having supported Republicans since the end of the Civil War, African Americans began to desert the party of Lincoln during the Great Depression in response to Franklin Roosevelt's economic programs and expressions of support for racial equality from several members of FDR's administration. World War II brought a new sense of vigor to the struggle for racial equality in the United States. The migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North, the ideological battle against fascism and the deepening conflict with communism, and intellectual challenges to traditional white views on race ensured that race would be a significant issue in the post-war era. Neither of the two major parties could avoid taking a stand.

Nelson A. Rockefeller was a critical player in this story. Since the 1940s a small group of liberal Republicans, chiefly from the Northeast, had routinely joined pro-civil

rights Democrats in Congress to sponsor civil rights legislation regarding voting rights, segregation, and equal employment opportunity. Like their Democratic allies, they favored a stronger role for the federal government in ensuring racial equality. Such a position, they maintained, represented a fulfillment of the tradition of Abraham Lincoln. It also represented good politics, for the black population of many cities in the Northeast had grown dramatically since the 1940s. In 1960, Rockefeller, who had eyes on the party's presidential nomination, voiced the concerns of this wing of the GOP in his fight for a strong civil rights plank at the Republican party's convention in Chicago. He persuaded nominee Richard Nixon to fight for a civil rights statement that expressed support for the sit-in demonstrations that had spread across the South that spring. Southern Republicans, who had grown in number since the mid-1950s, were predictably outraged. So were other conservatives, who worried about the expanding reach of government into employment matters and other areas related to private property. The party retreated from the Nixon/Rockefeller position, but Rockefeller had established himself as the leader of the pro-civil rights faction of the party at the presidential level.

As the civil rights movement intensified across the South during the Kennedy administration, battle lines within the Republican party hardened. Rockefeller and other liberals routinely criticized President Kennedy for being too timid and tardy in responding to the crisis. During the spring of 1963, Rockefeller blasted Kennedy for ignoring recommendations of the Civil Rights Commission regarding housing, employment, voting rights, and education, failing to live up to promises made in the Democrats' civil rights plank of 1960, and appointing anti-civil rights judges to the Federal bench in the South. On the other hand, conservatives within the Republican

party, led by Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, looked increasingly to the South as fertile ground for future GOP electoral gains. Ironically, even as Kennedy was being condemned by northern liberals in each party for doing too little, white southerners believed he was doing too much. The conservatives insisted that this growing resentment in Dixie could be combined with anti-government feelings in the West to propel the Republican party to victory in the 1964 presidential election.

The conflict between liberals and conservatives culminated in 1964 as Rockefeller and Goldwater battled for the Republican presidential nomination. Like the vast majority of Republicans in Congress, the New York governor strongly supported the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act. The law contained important provisions that outlawed segregation in public accommodations and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to combat employment discrimination. These two sections drew the wrath of Goldwater, who criticized them as unwarranted intrusions of federal power into the rights of private property owners and accordingly voted against the bill.

Goldwater's triumph in the California primary in June 1964 appeared to seal his victory as the party's nominee. The liberals insisted that Goldwater's civil rights stand would ruin the party in the urban North as well as the South, where the number of black voters was expected to increase substantially during the rest of the decade. Accordingly, Rockefeller joined other northern liberals behind the efforts of Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania to deny Goldwater the nomination at the convention and insist that the party adopt a strong civil rights plank. Race was one of the major issues on which the liberals battled for control of the party. The tightly organized Goldwater campaign easily beat back the liberal challenge on both fronts, however.

The Goldwater campaign has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. Whereas scholars writing in the 1960s largely dismissed Goldwater (and conservatism in general) as a curious but marginal force in American politics, more recent interpretations have depicted Goldwater's capture of the 1964 nomination as a harbinger of Reaganism and the growing power of conservative ideas. Liberals, scholars emphasize, were henceforth a negligible force in the Republican party.

Clearly, Goldwater's triumph in securing the 1964 nomination took liberals by surprise and did indeed signal that conservatives were gaining strength. But, as the historian Byron Hulseby has pointed out, the line between Goldwater's victory and the ascendancy of Reagan was by no means a straight one. Battles between liberals and conservatives over racial issues continued well past 1964. Here, too, Nelson Rockefeller was at the center of combat. As the civil rights struggle moved to the North issues of jobs, housing, education, and police brutality increasingly became the focus of public debate. Rockefeller was part of the Republican Coordinating Committee, a group of federal, state, and local officials who urged that the federal government move to guarantee voting rights in the South and spend more money to alleviate poverty in the ghettos of the urban North.

Rockefeller championed the latter view as he prepared to battle Richard Nixon for the Republican nomination in 1968. Stressing that much federal aid to distressed urban areas had been wasted and that the economic crisis of the late 1960s prohibited massive increases in federal spending, Nixon favored increased private investment in the ghettos, otherwise known as "black capitalism." Nixon, of course, captured the nomination in Miami and went on to win the White House that fall. Nixon would go on to spearhead

some important initiatives regarding racial policies, but Rockefeller liberalism, at least on civil rights matters, was clearly waning.

Several manuscript collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center are indispensable in researching how the Republican party dealt with African American civil rights matters in the 1960s. Nelson Rockefeller's papers yield rich insights into his views on the major civil rights issues of the era, as well as analyses of trends within the Republican party across the nation. As he ran for the 1964 nomination, Rockefeller kept large research files on Goldwater's civil rights positions and activities in the South. The Graham Molitor papers are especially valuable for information on the Arizona senator, as well as material on how major civil rights groups such as the NAACP viewed the situation within the Republican party. The George Hinman files are also an important resource on these and other similar topics. These and other collections, moreover, contain numerous news clippings and columns describing and analyzing the politics of 1964, 1968, the role of the Republican party in the South, and civil rights throughout the decade.

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