

History professor examines Nelson Rockefeller's career as a lens for Republican Party's rightward shift

August 20 2024, by Jodi Heckel



University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign history professor Marsha Barrett examines Nelson Rockefeller's career and the shift away from moderation in politics in her new book, "Nelson Rockefeller's Dilemma: The Fight to Save Moderate Republicanism." Credit: L. Brian Stauffer / University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Politician and businessman Nelson Rockefeller was seen as a moderate or liberal Republican even as he embraced conservative policies as the Republican Party shifted to the right in the 1960s and '70s.

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign history professor Marsha Barrett uses the political career of Rockefeller—the four-time New York governor and vice-president to Gerald Ford—as a lens to explore the evolution of the Republican party and the ascendancy of conservatism in her new [book](#), "Nelson Rockefeller's Dilemma: The Fight to Save Moderate Republicanism." Barrett is a political historian who examines how politicians and the state respond to social movements, race and public sentiment.

"I'm really interested in moderate Republicans as an example of politicians who blurred partisan lines in the mid-20th century," she said.

The prevailing view of Rockefeller as a moderate ignored how embattled moderates were within the Republican Party, Barrett wrote. She examines Rockefeller's career with an emphasis on policies that affected African Americans.

Barrett said moderate Republicanism came from the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt and the belief that government needed to be big enough to keep corporations in check.

"A generation later, the rise of the New Deal and Americans' changing expectations of government inspired Republicans to embrace an activist government again," she said.

Moderate and liberal Republicans were concerned about remaining viable in that political environment, she said, and the policy positions between them and Democrats were incrementally different, with many similarities, particularly in relation to civil rights legislation and foreign

policy.

As New York governor in the 1960s and early '70s, Rockefeller embraced many policies associated with a more liberal agenda, such as infrastructure and housing projects and expanding the state's university system. At the national level, he advocated for adding language to the party's platform that committed to achieving racial equity in voting, housing, schools and jobs. Moderate and liberal Republicans became known as "Rockefeller Republicans."

But the conservative Republican tradition that advocated for small government always had an antagonistic relationship with moderates, Barrett said, and after the New Deal, there was a movement toward conservatism that was informed by anti-Communism and the feeling that the Supreme Court had overstepped its bounds in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ending school segregation.

In its move to the right, the party discouraged bipartisanship and demanded that Republicans be uncompromising in pursuing their agenda, she said.

"They not only got upset at moderate or liberal Republicans but also at any Republican who was willing to work across the lines with Democrats. That created this very harsh ideology in the Republican party. It grew in popularity and became successful in demanding that everyone have these uncompromising positions," Barrett said.

Moderates either left the party, were pushed out or lost primary elections to more conservative Republicans. While Rockefeller tried to build a racially and ethnically diverse, bipartisan coalition early in his career, he shifted gears when he realized it wasn't working, Barrett said.

"One of the central premises of the book is that Nelson Rockefeller

wanted the Republican party to be a partner in civil rights legislation, to advocate for African Americans. When that doesn't work and he's just trying to get reelected in a more conservative party, we see his policies and rhetoric reflect that change," she said.

"People think of Nelson Rockefeller as the epitome of moderate Republicanism. In some important ways, he's an outlier. He had his heart set on becoming president, and he was very much interested in sticking with the Republican party as it moved rightward," Barrett said. "He was so driven by ambition and a desire to be president, if he was going to remain viable within the more conservative Republican party, he needed to make some changes."

To show that he was conservative enough for the party, Rockefeller focused on law-and-order policies, enacting punitive drug laws in New York that served as a model for other states and the federal government. He justified welfare cuts by claiming falsely that people were cheating the system, rather than acknowledging that the state had overextended itself, Barrett said.

"You take this vulnerable community that's already racialized and targeted as being criminal and you make hay with it," she said of his strategies.

It's not just a Republican phenomenon; politicians in both parties make similar choices, she said. Many Democrats also have embraced policies to try to show they are tough on crime and protect themselves from conservative attacks, she said.

The more conservative political environment that began in the 1960s with Republicans and Democrats moving right has continued.

"When Ronald Reagan left office, people like Newt Gingrich were more

antagonistic and had a more ideological approach to conservatism. They kept pushing the party further and further to the right. What we see now in the Republican party is part of this long tradition during the 20th century," Barrett said. "It will continue down this path as long as enough voters find this version of conservatism attractive."

She said she also was interested in understanding how voters responded to moderate Republicans and other politicians who didn't fit neatly in a partisan box.

"It seemed like a lot of voters didn't like the fact that there was all this inconsistency and diversity of thought in the parties. They wanted to know who they were voting for when they saw an 'R' or 'D' by their name," Barrett said. Today's partisanship is partly based on [political leaders](#) seeking power, "but also voters not wanting to think so hard about who they are casting votes for."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: History professor examines Nelson Rockefeller's career as a lens for Republican Party's rightward shift (2024, August 20) retrieved 21 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-history-professor-nelson-rockefeller-career.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--