

“Millionaires are More Democratic Now”

Nelson Rockefeller and the Politics of Wealth in New York

Marsha E. Barrett
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign¹
meb@illinois.edu

Abstract: Nelson Rockefeller, grandson of John D. Rockefeller, experienced his first electoral victory when he was elected governor of New York in 1958. Despite Rockefeller’s abundant use of his family’s fortune to dominate New York politics for the next fifteen years, he did not face significant questions about his practices until Gerald Ford nominated him to serve as vice president in 1974. This article examines Rockefeller’s use of money during an era of weak campaign-finance laws to explore the unique status of wealthy politicians in postwar New York and the role of money in American politics.

Keywords: New York Politics; Money and Politics; Nelson Rockefeller; Postwar Era

¹ I want to thank Katherine Rye Jewell, Blake Scott Ball, David Greenberg, and Kristin Hoganson who offered encouraging feedback on earlier versions of this work. I also extend my thanks to Robert Chiles of *New York History*, Jessica Neidl, and the anonymous readers who improved this article with their thoughtful insights and constructive feedback. Finally, I am grateful for the assistance of Amy Fitch of the Rockefeller Archive Center.

On January 11, 2017, Sheri Dillon, then President-elect Donald Trump’s tax lawyer tasked with addressing his conflict-of-interest issues, observed, “You know, the business empire built by President-elect Trump over the years is massive, not dissimilar to the fortunes of Nelson Rockefeller when he became vice president. But at that time, no one was so concerned.”² Dillon’s statement was immediately scrutinized by the press. National Public Radio’s Ron Elving described Dillon’s statement, in particular, as a “head scratcher” because, as he noted, the “widely accessible” record shows that Rockefeller’s nomination caused a good deal of concern, especially among congressional Democrats.³

Immediately upon the announcement of Gerald Ford’s nomination of Rockefeller, Congress and the media subjected Rockefeller’s and his family’s assets to weeks of scrutiny, which prompted a discussion of whether his assets should be put in a blind trust, a move that was ultimately deemed unnecessary. In 2017, journalists reported that Americans in 1974, in the wake of ethics and campaign finance reforms as well as the Watergate scandal, were especially likely to be suspicious of Rockefeller’s nomination and eventual confirmation.⁴ Dillon’s claim that “no one was so concerned” rings false when one considers that 128 days passed between Ford’s nomination of Rockefeller and the House vote to confirm him. For comparison, the year before, the process to appoint Ford to the vice presidency took fifty-six days. What the press in 2017 did not mention, however, was how vastly different the vice-presidential confirmation process was for Rockefeller in comparison to anything he experienced during his fifteen years as governor of New York or his three presidential bids in the 1960s. Since entering electoral politics in 1958, he had faced little public apprehension in regard to his finances, even as he spent exorbitant amounts of his own money to advance his political career.

² Matthew Yglesias, “Trump’s Lawyer Is Totally Wrong about Nelson Rockefeller,” *Vox Media*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/1/11/14238592/trump-nelson-rockefeller>.

³ Ron Elving, “Fact Check: Trump Lawyer’s Claim and Comparison to Rockefeller is a Head Scratcher,” *NPR*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/12/509413961/fact-check-trump-lawyers-claim-and-comparison-to-rockefeller-is-a-head-scratcher>.

⁴ Elving, “Fact Check,” January 11, 2017; Jake Miller, “Conflicts of Interest: Donald Trump 2017 vs. Nelson Rockefeller 1974,” *CBS News*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/conflicts-of-interest-donald-trump-2017-vs-nelson-rockefeller-1974/>.

The scrutiny that Rockefeller experienced during the fall of 1974 led him to release twelve years of his tax returns, resulting in a settlement with the Internal Revenue Service for more than \$900,000 in unpaid back taxes. The public inquiry led to the revelation that the former New York governor (1959–1973) had a questionable and controversial habit of using his personal money to give gifts to senior aides such as Henry Kissinger, who received a \$50,000 gift when he left Rockefeller’s staff as a foreign policy adviser to join the Nixon administration.⁵ It also exposed Rockefeller’s dubious uses of his wealth, such as secretly financing a disparaging biography of his 1970 gubernatorial opponent. This new focus on Rockefeller’s finances was notable to *New York Times* journalist Tom Wicker, who wrote in November 1974, “The curious thing is that the entanglements of wealth that may defeat [Rockefeller] were scarcely even mentioned when he sought the Presidential nomination in 1964 and 1968, or in his four campaigns for Governor of New York.”⁶ Rockefeller’s ascent to the White House—and the election of Donald Trump four decades later—poses a question that has arisen in every era of American history: If, how, and to what extent do wealth, and wealthy politicians in particular, distort the American electoral system? Examining Rockefeller’s political career in New York, in addition to his appointment to the vice presidency, provides insight into the role of money and significance of wealthy politicians in twentieth-century American politics. The period in which Rockefeller became a fixture in national politics as the standard bearer for moderate Republicanism provides an opportunity to explore the topic of money in politics in two distinct ways. First, it sheds light on the ways in which money functioned within American politics in the postwar era before the campaign finance reforms of the 1970s that resulted in new disclosure laws and stricter oversight of campaign spending at the state and federal level. Second, Rockefeller’s lavish spending on his political

⁵ Historian Jeremi Suri concludes that Rockefeller’s gift to Kissinger “solidified their unequal relationship” and assured that Kissinger would remain in Rockefeller’s debt after joining the Nixon administration. Michael S. Kramer and Sam Roberts, *I Never Wanted to Be Vice-President of Anything!': An Investigative Biography of Nelson Rockefeller* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 184; “Hearing Urged on Rocky’s Gifts,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1974, 9; Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 201–202.

⁶ Tom Wicker, “Mr. Rockefeller’s Ordeal,” *New York Times*, November 1, 1974.

career reveals the unique advantages experienced by the wealthiest Americans in electoral politics, particularly when they self-fund their campaigns.



Nelson Rockefeller christens a campaign train during his first electoral campaign, 1958. (COURTESY OF ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER.)

Scholarship on money in politics tends to focus on two areas of concern: the evolution of campaign-finance reform and the role of wealthy interests who seek to influence policy through political contributions. Scholars have found, however, that wealthy self-funded politicians, in comparison to wealthy donors, have inspired less concern among voters. According to the political scientist Robert E. Mutch, who examines twentieth-century campaign-finance reform, the “original goal of reform was to curb the ability of big business and the rich to turn their wealth into political influence.”⁷ Reforms

⁷ Mutch, author of numerous works on campaign-finance reform, characterizes the development of campaign-finance reform as a fitful history that centers on political scandals. Mutch identifies two “scandal-reform cycles” in the twentieth century. The first sequence took place during the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, when Congress—followed by state legislatures—responded to public outcry by prohibiting corporations from making campaign contributions, mandating political committees reveal their donors, and setting limits on campaign expenditures. A New York State investigation of life insurance firms inadvertently revealed a staggering amount of corporate contributions to Theodore Roosevelt’s 1904 presidential campaign. The second scandal-reform cycle occurred after Watergate, which resulted in more enforceable

instituted during the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft, for example, demonstrated an anxiety about wealthy donors influencing politics in secret, rather than wealthy self-funded candidates using their money openly to advance their own agendas.⁸ While calls for campaign-finance reform have been dated back to the nineteenth century, the majority of scholarship on campaign-finance reform is published by political scientists and journalists who focus on the period after the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 and a series of reforms implemented in the wake of the Watergate scandal.⁹ Other works by political scientists on campaign finance examine the effect of

reforms intended to limit the influence of rich donors and encourage small contributions with the creation of an enforcement agency, the Federal Election Commission. For a brief overview of New York's campaign finance laws from 1829 to 1974 see Michael J. Malbin and Peter W. Brusoe, "Campaign Finance Policy in the State and City of New York," in Gerald Benjamin, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of New York State Government and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 80–82; Robert E. Mutch, *Buying the Vote: A History of Campaign Finance Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–5.

⁸ Historian Paula Baker notes that the issue of money in politics tends to interest people highly involved in politics rather than the general public. When the public did become interested it tended to do so in response to dramatic events such as the assassination of President James Garfield or Watergate. In her 2012 book, *Curbing Campaign Cash*, Baker examines a controversial U.S. Senate campaign in Michigan in 1918 that resulted in the Supreme Court decision in *Newberry v. United States* that found that Congress could not regulate primary elections to explore the first challenge to federal-campaign regulation. Baker uses this case study to examine Progressive Era campaign-finance regulations and the ways in which they helped increase the cost of campaigns. Paula Baker, ed., *Money and Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 1; Paula Baker, *Curbing Campaign Cash: Henry Ford, Truman Newberry, and the Politics of Progressive Reform*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012).

⁹ In his history of campaign-finance reform, political scientist Anthony Corrado dates the first calls for such reform to the 1830s, when members of Congress called for an end to the "assessment" system in which political parties demanded contributions from people to whom they gave positions in government or politics through the spoils system. Corrado notes that concerns about the influence of money in politics existed during the nation's earliest years, when candidates tended to be wealthy members of society who could afford to use their own money to make themselves available for public office. Works that focus on 1970s reforms will sometimes include a few pages of historical context, but the coverage of earlier periods is sparse and concludes that campaign-finance-reform efforts were largely ineffective until the 1970s. Anthony Corrado, "Money and Politics: A History of Federal Campaign Finance Law" in *The New Campaign Finance Sourcebook*, eds. Anthony Corrado, Thomas E. Mann, Daniel R. Ortiz, and Trevor Potter (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 7–47; Herbert E. Alexander, *Financing Politics: Money, Elections, and Political Reform* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1984); Steven M. Gillon, *"That's Not What We Meant to Do": Reform and Its Unintended Consequences in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000);

specific reforms at the federal and state levels, the ways in which the evolution of campaign finance changes the nature of political campaigning, and the impact of reforms on the role of political action committees and other interest groups.¹⁰

Historian Julian Zelizer’s work on campaign-finance reform shifts attention away from focusing on the crisis of Watergate as the impetus for significant change in the 1970s. He argues that a series of independent reform efforts beginning in the 1950s led by members of Congress—often with partisan motivations—campaign-finance experts, philanthropists, and public-interest groups helped raise awareness around the issue with the help of an increasingly aggressive press to make the passage of reform legislation in 1971 possible.¹¹ Zelizer’s work stands out as one of the few studies of campaign finance by a historian.¹² While political historians have not produced a proliferation of work on

Frank J. Sorauf, *Inside Campaign Finance: Myths and Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 2; Frank J. Sorauf, *Money in American Elections* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foreman/Little, Brown College Division, 1988).

¹⁰ The work of journalists since the reforms of the 1970s reflects, again, an enduring concern that contributions from “special interests,” including wealthy donors, have subverted the will of voters. Herbert E. Alexander, *Reform and Reality: The Financing of State and Local Campaigns* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1991); Michael J. Malbin and Thomas L. Gains, *The Day After Reform: Sobering Campaign Finances Lessons from the American States* (Albany, NY: Rockefeller Institute Press, 1998); Burton D. Sheppard, *Rethinking Congressional Reform: The Reform Roots of Special Interest Congress* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Books, 1985); Larry J. Sabato, *PAC Power: Inside the World of Political Action Committees* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984). Similar to Sorauf, Sabato’s *PAC Power* includes a few pages on political action committees and campaign finance before the 1970s. Elizabeth Drew, *Politics and Money: The New Road to Corruption* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1983); John B. Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy: Elites, Special Interests, and the Betrayal of Public Trust* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000); Robert G. Kaiser, *The Triumph of Lobbying and the Corrosion of American Government* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009); Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

¹¹ Zelizer also demonstrates that campaign finance after the New Deal era was shaped by the inability of Progressive Era reforms to rein in spending, a weakened party system, increased use of media campaigns that were used to counteract the decline of parties, limited public interest in reform, and the Supreme Court’s protection of free speech. Julian Zelizer, *Governing America: The Revival of Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 195–220.

¹² In an edited volume on American elections, Gareth Davies and Zelizer observe that “elections have received astonishingly little attention from academic historians during the past four decades.” They attribute this lack of scholarship on elections, of which campaign finance is an offshoot, to political historians’ increased interest in social and cultural history. Davies and Zelizer published an edited

modern American campaign finance, they have produced a well-established literature examining wealthy elites and business leaders who have sought to forward their political agendas by entering politics as donors and behind-the-scenes influencers in the twentieth century.¹³ Examining Rockefeller's self-funded campaigns demonstrates the significance of elections as tools for understanding the role of wealth in politics and contextualizes Zelizer's finding of a lack of grassroots interest in campaign-finance reform. More

volume of nineteenth- and twentieth-century election history to reinsert political historians into this area. As a result, a chapter by Brian Balogh entitled, "From Corn to Caviar: The Evolution of Presidential Election Communications, 1960–2000," serves as an example of a newer work by a political historian who explores issues related to campaign finance, such as the innovations of Richard Viguerie, who helped energize the conservative movement by using direct-mail campaigns to increase small donations to conservative campaigns beginning in the 1960s. Viguerie's work took on new importance after Congress passed finance reforms in 1974 that instituted a \$1,000 limit on individual campaign donations. Balogh notes that direct mail became a tool used by Republicans and Democrats who sought to bypass traditional party gatekeepers to fund their campaigns. Davies and Zelizer identify the U.S. elections series published by the University Press of Kansas as a notable exception to the lack of work on elections in the field of history. Another example of what may represent a renewed interest in elections is Margaret O'Mara's *Pivotal Tuesdays*. Gareth Davies and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *America at the Ballot Box: Elections and Political History* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 3, 238–251; Margaret O'Mara, *Pivotal Tuesdays: Four Elections that Shaped the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

¹³ Examples include works by Robert F. Burk and Kim Phillips-Fein, who have examined the efforts of wealthy figures, such as members of the du Pont family who, through the creation of organizations such as the American Liberty League, sought to counteract the New Deal reforms of the Franklin Roosevelt administration and—in Burk's account—assert their own, not necessarily conservative but hierarchical vision of the world. Richard E. Holl also examines the Roosevelt administration by focusing on business leaders known as "corporate liberals" who chose to cooperate with the president's New Deal agenda by aiding the mobilization of the nation in preparation for the war effort. Robert F. Burk, *The Corporate State and the Broker State: The Du Ponts and American National Politics, 1925-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); Richard E. Holl, *From the Boardroom to the War Room: America's Corporate Liberals and FDR's Preparedness Program* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005). For a work that explores the political activities of elites beginning during the American Revolution, see Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Additional works in this area include Alice O'Connor, "Financing the Counterrevolution," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *Lobbying America: The Politics of Business from Nixon to NAFTA* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

pointedly, it exhibits that wealthy politicians enjoyed less scrutiny than average politicians, despite exorbitant spending and the gradual success of finance-reform efforts in the 1960s, in part because of a common notion that spending one's own money made you less susceptible to corruption.

Exploring the role of money as it relates to Nelson Rockefeller's rise and eventual dominance in New York politics provides critical insights into a period known more for campaign-finance loopholes than campaign-finance laws. Rockefeller's financial disclosures during the 1974 confirmation process, in addition to a range of archival sources, offer an unusually revealing look into an opaque era of campaign finance. Rockefeller's use of his vast resources to support his political ambitions reveals the ways in which his wealth shaped his public career and influenced the political machinery of New York. While voters were aware that Rockefeller's wealth gave him advantages in politics, the extent of its role was impossible to trace and went without sustained inquiry until after he left office. The nomination process in 1974 proved to be an effective examination of his finances, encouraged by an assertive press, but it simultaneously emphasized the advantages enjoyed by wealthy politicians even during a period of intensified concern about money in politics and campaign-finance reforms. Ultimately, Rockefeller's political career reveals that while wealthy politicians' unique ability to self-fund does not guarantee victory, it certainly facilitates an outsized presence in a modern American political system marked by anemic campaign finance laws, weak political parties, media-heavy campaigns, and the notion that wealth and a willingness to fund one's own campaign is a qualification for politics and governance.

A Rockefeller Seeks Public Office

Nelson Rockefeller was something of a throwback in American politics in part because of campaign-finance reform efforts at the turn of the twentieth century and his eagerness to use his personal fortune to fund his own political career. Men like Rockefeller, the grandson of John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil Company, were more commonly found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were the businessmen-politicians who used their own fortunes to enter public office or an official role in a political party rather than

influence from the outside. Money has guaranteed enhanced access to the American political system since the nation's inception, but the system of campaign finance transformed the role of the wealthy in politics in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Marcus Alonzo Hanna was one of those figures who changed the system. The industrialist, campaign fundraiser, and Republican kingmaker modernized campaign finance from the old system in which successful businessmen and bankers funded their own campaigns to one in which those men donated to campaigns so they could influence the politicians who would be elected.¹⁴

While politicians like Rockefeller were less common in the twentieth century than earlier periods, New York State had no shortage of wealthy politicians. The most celebrated, of course, are Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, but others include Herbert Lehman, who served as governor from 1933 until 1942, and W. Averell Harriman, who was the incumbent when Rockefeller first ran for governor in 1958. Harriman, who was born into one of America's richest families, care of his father, railroad baron Edward H. Harriman, was elected governor in 1954. The year before Rockefeller announced his candidacy, *Fortune* magazine published an article identifying the seventy-six richest Americans. J. Paul Getty, who the magazine said was worth \$700 million to \$1 billion, topped the list. Nelson Rockefeller's father John D. Rockefeller Jr. trailed Getty with an estimated wealth of \$400 to 700 million. Nelson and his four brothers were reported to be each worth \$100 to 200 million. Meanwhile, Governor Harriman's wealth was listed as somewhere between \$75 and 100 million. New York was overrepresented on the list; fifty-three of the seventy-six millionaires hailed from New York. Of the fifty richest Americans interviewed by *Fortune*, close to one-third participated in politics personally at the local, state, or federal level, and the majority of the respondents reported that they were unaware of any serious scorn for the rich, as had been reported during the Depression.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mutch, *Buying the Vote*, 25; Sydney Hyman, "The Log Cabin Myth Comes to an End," *New York Times*, September 21, 1958, page SM26.

¹⁵ *Fortune* magazine identified the "very rich" in America as anyone who was worth at least \$50 million. The publication identified 155 people who fit this category, while the U.S. Treasury estimated that there were between 150 and 500 people who met that distinction. *Fortune* featured the wealthiest half of the list they compiled. To supplement the article, *Fortune* sent questionnaires to 175 American multimillionaires and included in its article the responses of the fifty they deemed

Nelson Rockefeller's fortune gave him, as a political newcomer, a distinct advantage within the New York Republican Party. His wealth made him a formidable contender for the Republican gubernatorial nomination because of the state party's long-standing struggle to fill its coffers. In 1956, L. Judson Morhouse, the New York State Republican Party chairman and a former state assemblyman, met Rockefeller after inviting him and several other wealthy Republicans to a meeting to discuss paying off the party's campaign debt. The two ended up having a half-hour conversation after the meeting during which Morhouse learned of Rockefeller's interest in entering electoral politics after having held appointive positions in the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower administrations. Morhouse began to consider Rockefeller's potential as a candidate. Traditionally, a state party chair remained neutral while helping to organize the party's ticket; however, in the months before the GOP convention in 1958, Morhouse made it clear that he believed Rockefeller was the only Republican with a chance of beating Harriman. While it is likely that Rockefeller's ability to fund a significant portion of his own campaign was especially persuasive to Morhouse, who would be left the onerous task of fundraising to cover party debt, other candidates complained that he had acted inappropriately. Republican Party professionals preferred a party regular such as Leonard W. Hall, who had served as the Republican national chair in the mid-1950s and had received approval for his gubernatorial bid from President Eisenhower.

In relatively short order, Rockefeller's wealth helped officials set aside their misgivings about a political neophyte known for views to the left of the Republican mainstream. Their embrace of Rockefeller occurred while he went to great effort to prove himself a viable candidate who did not rely on his family name and status alone. He attended Republican dinners, sought favor from influential state Republicans, and visited upstate New York to greet potential voters and delegates. Rockefeller's tour of upstate New York was orchestrated by experienced conservative Republican legislator Malcolm Wilson, who would end up being Rockefeller's lieutenant governor for fifteen years. The trip was intentionally designed to be low-key to detract attention from Rockefeller's wealth, but such

most representative of the group. The average American man earned \$25,000 a year in 1957. Richard Austin Smith, "The Fifty-Million-Dollar Man," *Fortune*, November 1957, 176–238.

efforts appeared to be unnecessary. Wilson remembered that time fondly, recalling, “No baggage carriers, no sycophants, no PR men, nothing but us. And I paid for it personally. Not a farthing of Nelson Rockefeller’s was used. When I had accumulated a debt I’d forward a statement to Herb Gerlach and I’d be reimbursed.”¹⁶ What Wilson did not mention, however, was who ultimately paid the bill. While not a definitive answer, according to Rockefeller’s financial disclosures in 1974, he paid state and local Republican organizations in New York \$2,447 in 1958, including \$1,000 to the Westchester Republican County Committee, which was overseen by Gerlach.¹⁷ Rockefeller’s trips to upstate New York had more to do with photo ops with livestock and county fair princesses than debates about Republican principles. His stance on issues of concern to Republicans in New York in this era took a backseat to a wink and a smile. Rather than dismiss a Rockefeller because of his rarified background or question his ability to relate to the problems of the average New Yorker, many voters seemed impressed instead that Rockefeller was “down to earth,” a “nice guy,” and “pretty sharp.”¹⁸ According to F. Clifton White, who was active in New York Republican Party politics at the time, Wilson supported Rockefeller because he thought Republicans were likely to lose that year and the party needed someone “who could raise the money, and put up the money to run a campaign.”¹⁹ An August 1958 *New York Post*

¹⁶ Wilson took pride in refusing gifts from Rockefeller, whether that included the use of family resort properties, income for his law firm, or donations to the Westchester County Republican Committee, from which Wilson received reimbursement for their trip upstate. This set Wilson apart from people like Morhouse and numerous members of Rockefeller’s staff who enjoyed substantial gifts from Rockefeller, as a candidate and later as governor. Kramer and Roberts, *Biography of Nelson Rockefeller*, 198; Richard Norton Smith, *On His Own Terms: A Life of Nelson Rockefeller* (New York: Random House, 2014), 279.

¹⁷ The same filings revealed that in 1957, Rockefeller contributed political gifts totaling \$8,400 to state and local Republican organizations. The Westchester County committee received \$1,500, or over \$13,000 in today’s dollars. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Rules and Administration, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York to be Vice President of the United States*, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1974), 480.

¹⁸ “Nelson Rockefeller Enjoying His First Campaign,” *Herald Statesman* (Yonkers, NY), July 23, 1958.

¹⁹ White is best known for running Barry Goldwater’s 1964 campaign for the presidential nomination. White, who was organizing Walter Mahoney’s campaign for the Republican gubernatorial nomination, said that he and his candidate believed some Republican county leaders had supported Rockefeller because they were bought off. Rockefeller biographer Cary Reich asserts that while Rockefeller’s wealth was persuasive in a difficult election year, he did not buy the nomination. F. Clifton White, interview by Cary Reich, circa 1980s, Cary Reich Papers, folder 154,

article reported that Republican managers admitted that they hoped Rockefeller's wealth, business connections, and access to Madison Avenue would make up for his inexperience.²⁰ A longtime New York Republican and Rockefeller associate, Jack Wells, recalled that by the time Rockefeller entered state politics the state "party had been stumbling along on a state wide basis for years and years." Even Thomas E. Dewey, the two-time Republican presidential nominee, struggled to raise funds for the party in the 1940s. The prospect of a well-financed campaign was a major factor in Rockefeller's rapid rise, but Wells also noted that Rockefeller was a skilled retail politician who made a positive impression on people at every campaign stop in 1958.²¹



Nelson Rockefeller, accompanied by his son Steven Rockefeller (left) and Assemblyman Malcolm Wilson (right), greets a concessions worker during a campaign stop at the Cooperstown Fair, 1958. (PRESTIGE PHOTOS BY SAMMY SCHULMAN)

box 4, Series 1: Interview Transcript and Subject Files, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY; Cary Reich, *The Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller: Worlds to Conquer 1908–1958* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 718.

²⁰ Doris Fleeson, "Money No Object," *New York Post*, August 20, 1958.

²¹ John Wells, interview by Hugh Morrow, August 14–15, 1979, NAR, folder 23, box 2, Hugh Morrow Interviews, RG 4, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

A private survey commissioned by Rockefeller in 1957 found that his wealth and family's philanthropic reputation were typically advantages rather than liabilities among New Yorkers. Some respondents thought he would be a good candidate because of his wealth, whether because he would not be beholden to anyone or that he would be able to manage money. The survey also found that Rockefeller's identity as a philanthropist also aided his efforts. The African American interviewees who responded positively to Rockefeller, for example, emphasized his political independence and honesty because they believed his wealth ensured he would not be indebted to special interests. Generally, the survey found that Rockefeller had a positive reputation among African Americans in New York—whether because of his family's reputation of donating to Black causes or the perception that a wealthy man would not discriminate because of his secure status in society.²² His wealth, however, did draw criticism from some respondents; although they did not say they distrusted his intentions or believed he had an unfair advantage, some wondered if he could relate to the working person or the poor. Farmers, in particular, worried that neither Harriman nor Rockefeller understood their economic troubles because of their wealth.²³ While Rockefeller's wealth did concern some New Yorkers, there was a general approval of the wealthy entering politics if they planned to fund their own campaigns. The prominent pollster Samuel Lubell found similar results when he interviewed New Yorkers on the governor's race in October 1958. While there was some dissent, he found that "a majority of the voters liked the idea of millionaires running for public office." Some respondents expressed the belief that millionaires were better than the

²² Rockefeller's use of polling was somewhat novel in the 1950s, but by no means a first for the state of New York. Thomas E. Dewey biographer Richard Norton Smith writes that Dewey befriended George Gallup in 1942, and the pioneer in the new field of political polling produced data that helped convince the political aspirant, like Rockefeller fifteen years later, that he had a good chance of winning the governorship. For additional information on Dewey's early adoption of technology see Robert C. Fordan and Todd M. Schaefer, "An Overlooked Campaign Pioneer?: Thomas Dewey and Television in the 1950 New York Governor's Race," *New York History* 100, no. 2, (Winter 2019): 209–227. Commissioned Survey by Samuel Lubell, 1958, NAR, folder 477, box 47, J.1 Politics, RG 4, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY; Richard Norton Smith, *Thomas E. Dewey and His Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 262–263.

²³ Commissioned Survey by Samuel Lubell, 1958, NAR, folder 477, box 47, J.1 Politics, RG 4, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

average politician. A Long Island wife of a county worker conveyed this point candidly: “What difference does it make how rich they are? If [politicians are] not millionaires when they come in, they will be when they go out.” The acceptance of amateur millionaire politicians may have been the result of a growing dissatisfaction with politics more generally, but these men were welcomed in a way that Lubell said would amaze the founders of their families. One respondent summed up this phenomenon succinctly: “Millionaires are more democratic now than they used to be.”²⁴

The general campaign between a Rockefeller and a Harriman was soon discussed in the press as an opportunity for New Yorkers to trade one millionaire for another. The *New York Mirror* printed a humor piece that referred to the 1958 gubernatorial race as the “most open choice between multimillionaires the poor voters ever had.”²⁵ A few months later, the *New York Times* conducted a survey of the state and concluded that voters had decided to “give a young guy a chance” because it was unlikely to matter who was elected.²⁶ While both candidates had significant personal wealth, Harriman did not spend his or his family’s money as generously on the campaign as Rockefeller had done. One half of the “Gold Dust Twins,” as one reporter called the gubernatorial candidates, had developed a reputation for not being a major financial contributor to his own campaigns or that of his peers. (Despite this reputation, even Harriman had used his wealth to impact New York politics; he contributed a significant sum to Robert F. Wagner Jr.’s successful 1953 New York City mayoral campaign, including paying the rent for the campaign’s headquarters during the first weeks of the race.)²⁷ Ultimately, Rockefeller bested Harriman by 557,000

²⁴ Samuel Lubell, “The Views of Wealth in Politics Vary,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1958, 14.

²⁵ H. I. Phillips, “Hi There!,” *New York Mirror*, August 22, 1958.

²⁶ Rockefeller was seventeen years Harriman’s junior. Leo Egan, “Survey of State Sees Rockefeller and Hogan Ahead,” *New York Times*, October 26, 1958.

²⁷ Harriman’s 1952 presidential campaign was under-funded despite members of his family and a few wealthy friends donating \$5,000 each. According to his biographer, Harriman had difficulty raising small donations because people assumed his campaign would be well-funded. When Harriman sought help from Herbert H. Lehman, who was then one of New York’s U.S. senators, Lehman agreed to double whatever Harriman contributed to the previous Lehman campaign. It turned out that Harriman had given \$100. Herbert A. Kenny, “Multi-Millionaires Begging for Votes,” *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1958, 1; Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891–1986* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992), 492, 504.

votes, the second-biggest victory margin in a New York gubernatorial election, and with 5,678,666 votes cast, the election surpassed previous records for turnout.²⁸ Rockefeller's campaign was also the most expensive for statewide office in New York up to that point. The official totals stated that he spent close to \$1.8 million, while Harriman spent \$1.1 million.²⁹ It is worth noting that these numbers are estimates based on a system of campaign finance in New York that was regulated by laws with numerous loopholes. For example, while Rockefeller was in office, state finance laws restricted primary candidates to a ten-cent per voter expenditure, but this rule could be circumvented by borrowing or creating numerous campaign committees because each one was allowed to contribute up to that ten-cent-per-voter limit.³⁰



Nelson Rockefeller works with an assistant at the back of his private plane while his first wife Mary Clark Rockefeller speaks with a political aide, 1958. (COURTESY OF ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER.)

²⁸ The previous record of 5,473,048 votes was set in 1950 when Thomas Dewey defeated Walter A. Lynch. Leo Egan, "Upheaval Looms in State Politics," *New York Times*, November 6, 1958, 1.

²⁹ Reich, *Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 766.

³⁰ In 1974, Rockefeller disclosed to Congress that his first campaign cost \$1.7 million. Robert A. Diamond and Stanley N. Wellborn, eds., *Dollar Politics: The Issue of Campaign Spending* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1974), 44, 1; U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 554.

Rockefeller as Governor

Once elected governor, Rockefeller continued to spend his family money lavishly and, in the process, changed the inner workings of electoral politics and governance in New York. Before he entered electoral politics, Rockefeller looked to his father, John D. Rockefeller Jr., to help fund his ambitious plans, such as starting a charitable foundation with his brothers, which became one of the most well-endowed foundations in the nation.³¹ After the death of his father in 1960, Nelson cultivated a close relationship with his stepmother, Martha Baird Rockefeller, who became a regular donor to his political campaigns until her death in 1971. Nelson’s longtime adviser Hugh Morrow called her an unflinching “principal source of campaign funds.”³² In time, Rockefeller’s political campaigns became a family enterprise and the public had little opportunity for oversight. Richard Reeves of the *New York Times* concluded in 1974 that New Yorkers grew accustomed to stories about Rockefeller’s “casual use of his money and power.”³³ The New York press commented on Rockefeller’s use of his wealth to aid his political career, but journalists tended to consider it secondary or tertiary to his political success. A month before his 1966 reelection, the *New York Times* noted that while Rockefeller had trailed in the polls, he was making gains, according to his supporters and detractors, thanks to his skill as a “natural campaigner,” rather than his great wealth.³⁴ Three years later, while the Democratic Party struggled to find a challenger for Rockefeller, the *Times* quoted an unnamed upstate Republican politician who said, “Rockefeller owns this party, period.” However, the article attributed his control of the party to his skillful use of power—mainly through his distribution of patronage—his personality, and his willingness to fundraise for local Republican candidates. Rockefeller’s wealth was obviously a factor, but its significance was not reported as being central to his success. The same article, however, noted that Rockefeller’s practice of funding his own campaigns and contributing generously to local Republicans meant that county chairmen were freed up to

³¹ Reich, *Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 156, 390, 637.

³² David Rockefeller, interview by Hugh Morrow, July 10, 1980, NAR, folder 49, box 4, Hugh Morrow Interviews, RG 4, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

³³ Richard Reeves, “Questions to Rockefeller Ignored a Basic: Issues,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1974, 5.

³⁴ “The Republicans Defend,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1966, 236.

“solicit local campaign contributions from wealthy Republicans.”³⁵ In 1971, Paul Hoffman, a New York reporter, compared Rockefeller’s control of the state party to Thomas Dewey’s in the 1940s and 1950s when he gained a stranglehold on the party through patronage and access to deep wells of cash rooted in his Wall Street connections. Dewey, who was not personally wealthy as governor, used patronage and strict management of the party’s finances to maintain control of the state organization.³⁶ The aforementioned articles about Rockefeller’s substantial contributions to the state party did not mention any numbers, but according to the former governor’s estimates, he contributed \$1,031,637 to local Republican committees and clubs within the state party between 1956 and 1974. During the same period, he gave \$80,599 to “Rockefeller Team New York State campaigns” and an additional \$411,966 to congressional, state, and local candidates in New York.³⁷

Rockefeller’s unrestrained spending on campaigns became a given, but also a seemingly insurmountable challenge for his opponents in New York. In his 1968 book *The New Politics: The Expanding Technology of Political Manipulation*, James M. Perry noted that Rockefeller’s 1966 campaign was “probably the most expensive nonpresidential campaign ever put together in America.” He estimated the total cost at \$5.72 million, although the official total reported by the Rockefeller campaign was \$4.8 million.³⁸ Richard Reeves recalled that a campaign staffer from 1966 revealed that when the governor’s advisers were battling to implement competing plans to target the youth vote, Rockefeller

³⁵ Richard Reeves, “State Politicians’ 1970 Forecast: G.O.P. United, Democrats Not,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1969, 1.

³⁶ Hoffman wrote that Rockefeller used patronage to “buy” the votes of Republicans and Democrats in the state legislature. He cited the example of an upstate Democratic assemblyman who broke with his party to be the deciding vote in favor of Rockefeller’s sales-tax increase in 1969. A few months later, the assemblyman received a position on the Civil Service Commission, which awarded him a \$27,500 sinecure. Paul Hoffman, “New York’s GOP: The End of Liberalism,” *The Nation*, April 12, 1971, 457–461; Smith, *Thomas E. Dewey*, 217–218, 347, 351, 378.

³⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 479.

³⁸ Herbert Alexander reported that Rockefeller spent \$2.2 million on his 1962 campaign—a 22 percent increase over his 1958 total—and \$4.9 million, or nearly ten times his Democratic opponent, in 1966. Herbert E. Alexander, *Money in Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1972); James M. Perry, *The New Politics: The Expanding Technology of Political Manipulation* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1968), 107.

settled the dispute by funding both plans which cost \$200,000 and \$250,000, respectively.³⁹ William Pfeiffer, Rockefeller’s campaign manager, explained to Perry, with regard to spending, “I spent every nickel that was spent...and that’s it. We wouldn’t in the slightest deviate from the law. The Rockefeller family is one of the most important in the world. They’re not going to be caught on that sort of thing.” Perry observed that while he was sure Pfeiffer complied with the law, he explained that “the law in campaign financing, is an uncertain thing.”⁴⁰ While Pfeiffer described careful spending habits, Rockefeller was able to fund his campaigns in a way that would make most politicians envious, but certainly left his rivals outmatched long before the Democratic Party named a nominee. Pfeiffer noted that Rockefeller never had to pay extra money to launch a campaign because his campaign advisers were permanent staff members.⁴¹



Governor Nelson Rockefeller and his second wife Margaretta (Happy) Rockefeller enjoy the festivities at the 1966 Republican state convention after Rockefeller is nominated for a third term in Rochester, NY, September 8, 1966. (COURTESY OF ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER.)

³⁹ Reeves, “Questions to Rockefeller,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1974, 5.

⁴⁰ Perry, *The New Politics*, 135.

⁴¹ William Pfeiffer, interview by Hugh Morrow, April 5, 1980, NAR, folder 44, box 3, Hugh Morrow Interviews, RG 4, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

Although Rockefeller's spending stretched the limits of precedent, laws, and sometimes propriety, his advertising dollars dominated television airtime with little comment while he was governor. In 1966, Rockefeller outspent his opponent six to one on television commercials produced by the leading New York City advertising agency Jack Tinker & Partners (who worked on campaigns for Alka-Seltzer and Braniff Airways, Inc.) to beat Democratic nominee Frank O'Connor with 2,690,626 votes to 2,298,363.⁴² While Perry observed that Rockefeller was a "great campaigner" and an "exceptionally able governor" in 1966, he concluded, "The figures show that Rockefeller could have been beaten; he *should* have been beaten. He won only because he has so much money, so much talent working for him—and, finally, a bit of luck."⁴³ In 1970, during the campaign when Rockefeller infamously spent \$10,000 on a disparaging biography of his Democratic opponent, Arthur Goldberg, the former U.S. Secretary of Labor and Supreme Court Justice, Rockefeller waged the most expensive television campaign of a gubernatorial candidate to date, when he spent \$1.2 million compared to \$364,500 spent by Goldberg. In total, Rockefeller's campaign reported that it spent \$6.2 million on the general election and \$584,800 during the pre-nomination period, although there was no Republican primary. Ultimately, Rockefeller's spending set off alarms in Congress in 1974, but these practices garnered muted attention from the press or voters, even though this was a period when journalists published numerous articles nationwide about rising campaign costs beginning in the mid-1960s.⁴⁴

Rockefeller's spending on his political career was singular, but it also reflected the growing cost of campaigns more generally while he was in office. The cost of presidential campaigns, in particular, grew tremendously after the introduction of television and media-centric campaigns in the 1950s. The 1968 presidential campaigns cost

⁴² The Conservative and Liberal Party candidates won a total of 1,017,257 votes. Perry, *The New Politics*, 134–137.

⁴³ Perry, *The New Politics*, 124, 136.

⁴⁴ Zelizer notes that due to a newly adversarial relationship between the press and politicians, fueled by the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, reporters published numerous stories about political corruption between 1969 and 1973. Zelizer, *Governing America*, 210; Alexander, *Money in Politics*, 35; Lester A. Sobel, ed., *Money & Politics: Contributions, Campaign Abuses & the Law* (New York: Facts on File, 1974), 4.

a record \$300 million, which was a 50 percent increase compared to 1964. This jump was troubling to critics interested in campaign-finance reform because the cost of presidential elections had already increased 43 percent between 1952 and 1964. Rockefeller’s short-lived, but extravagantly funded fourteen-week 1968 presidential campaign cost more than \$8 million. By comparison, Richard Nixon’s campaign for the presidential nomination that same year cost between \$10 and \$12 million.⁴⁵ Rockefeller’s campaign featured major media expenditures, including full-page advertisements in the *New York Times*. His failed presidential run points to the limitations of a well-funded campaign, but it also demonstrates how wealthy candidates can use their own funds to inundate voters with advertisements and contribute to the rising cost of campaigns.



Volunteers model campaign dresses, two of which are made of paper, from Rockefeller’s 1968 Republican presidential primary race, 1968. (COURTESY OF ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER.)

⁴⁵ The largest pre-nomination contribution to a Democrat or Republican was from a Rockefeller family member who gave \$1.5 million to one committee, although more may have been spent and not reported. Alexander found that Nixon’s campaign from January 1967 to July 1968 cost \$10 million dollars, with \$8.5 million spent in the first seven months of 1968, but he could only find broad categories for expenditures. Herbert E. Alexander, *Financing the 1968 Election* (Lexington, MA: Health Lexington Books, 1971), 8–10, 17–18; Sobel, *Money & Politics*, 3.

During his fifteen years as governor, Rockefeller funds also changed the look and procedure of New York's executive office in ways that became imperceptible as the years passed. He famously populated the walls of the New York State Executive Mansion in Albany with pieces from his multi-million-dollar art collection, and it was common to see him and his staff hop on and off his private jet as it ferried them across the state—a staff that he augmented with his own funds.⁴⁶ Hugh Morrow estimated that Rockefeller paid fully half of his expenses as governor. As Morrow noted, Rockefeller paid for an entire staff based in New York City, which included Morrow's salary and that of his staff, to work on state affairs. Hugh Carey, a seven-term member of the House of Representatives who went on to be elected as the Democratic governor of New York in 1974, remarked that Rockefeller enjoyed a highly effective staff as governor “that normally no one could afford.” Alton Marshall, who served as the governor's executive secretary from 1965 to 1971, attributed Rockefeller's spending in this regard to his desire for independence: “I think that was all because he wanted the freedom that he wanted, wanted to do what he wanted when he wanted to.” He kept up those spending habits, which included flying his staff to Albany on Mondays and back to New York City on Wednesdays, until his financial advisers warned him that the costs were too onerous even for his considerable reserves.⁴⁷ In 1971, the *New York Times* reported that while Rockefeller hoped to transfer about \$200,000 in personal staffing costs to the state, he would continue his practice of not charging rent for the use of

⁴⁶ Rockefeller installed in the New York State Executive Mansion approximately ninety works of modern and avant-garde art from artists including Picasso and Matisse. His personal collection included well over 2,000 pieces. Milton Esterow, “Governor's Art in Executive Mansion Attracting Growing Interest,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1967, 37.

⁴⁷ Rockefeller regularly spent his own money on expenses related to the governorship. When the Executive Mansion was damaged by fire in 1961, Rockefeller contributed \$58,000 of the \$558,000 restoration costs, at least, in part, to provide new gallery space for his artwork. The fire damaged twenty-five pieces in Rockefeller's collection. In 1971, the *New York Times* reported that Rockefeller spent \$500,000 rehabilitating and redecorating the Executive Mansion. Kramer and Roberts, *Biography of Nelson Rockefeller*, 94; Alton Marshall, interview by Hugh Morrow, October 11, 1979, NAR, folder 26, box 2, Hugh Morrow Interviews, RG 4, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY; Linda Greenhouse, “For Nearly a Generation, Nelson Rockefeller Held the Reins of New York State,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1979, 26; James R. Mellow, “Rocky as a Collector,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1969, page SM34; Frank Lynn, “Governor Wants Fund for Office,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1971, 28.

his Manhattan townhouse where his personal staff worked on state affairs or “any of his expenses as governor,” which included the use of his family’s three airplanes and a helicopter.⁴⁸ Rockefeller worked incessantly and paid lavishly to ensure that he had an expansive staff to make that possible, but his use of his own funds blurred the lines of what was governmental versus personal.

Robert Morgenthau, Rockefeller’s Democratic challenger in the 1962 gubernatorial election, attempted to make the governor’s spending practices a campaign issue. With a little over five weeks of campaigning remaining, Morgenthau accused Rockefeller of being a part-time governor—it was often reported in the press that Rockefeller was focused on winning the Republican presidential nomination in 1964—who relied on his personal staff to manage state affairs. The Democrat complained that the governor’s staffers who worked for the Rockefeller family were “not responsible to the people of the State of New York.” A week later, Morgenthau accused Rockefeller and the Republican Party of believing “government should be in the hands of the rich and well-born.” Despite Morgenthau’s complaints, Rockefeller’s spending did not become a major campaign issue. When the *New York Times* endorsed his re-election, the Editorial Board indirectly praised the governor’s personal funding of his staff: “Mr. Rockefeller, with unlimited staff work and his own indefatigable energy” had mastered his job as governor. *Newsday*, one of Long Island’s leading papers, also endorsed Rockefeller with a note of praise for “The over-all standard of administration,” which it called “first-rate.” A supporter of Morgenthau wrote a letter criticizing the *Times* for praising Rockefeller and his unlimited staff. “It is a personal staff,” wrote the reader, “dedicated to advancing the Governor’s political ambitions and not to solving the problems of New York.” The 1962 race

⁴⁸ The additional funds proposed by Rockefeller would cover expenditures such as utilities, maintenance, and security in addition to shifting the salaries of four telephone operators and two stenographers from his personal payroll to the state. A 1970 bill passed by the legislature approved increases for state salaries, including that of the governor. Rockefeller’s annual salary would increase from \$50,000 to \$85,000. It is unclear whether or not Rockefeller was able to transfer any of his expenses. The 1971 state budget resulted in the layoff of 3,250 state workers, although none worked in the legislative or executive branches of government. Frank Lynn, “Governor Wants Fund for Office,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1971, 28; Frank Lynn, “Governor’s Lament is Termed Truer than Mayor’s in Annual Blues-Singing,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1971, 27.

demonstrated that Rockefeller's unusual spending habits to further his career were well-known, but were readily deemed an advantage, at least by the press, rather than proof that Rockefeller was acting outside the bounds of typical governance.⁴⁹

Whether you questioned his motivations or welcomed his activism, Rockefeller and his voluminous staff were able to propose record numbers of administration bills. At the start of the 1960 legislative session, Rockefeller announced that he had submitted a "precedent breaking" number of programs to the legislature. At the end of the session, he could boast that the legislature had passed 140 of the 163 bills his administration proposed. Some of the most iconic Rockefeller-era programs, such as the Pure Waters Program, the Urban Development Corporation, and the expansion of the state university system, were first proposed in the governor's office and passed with little modification.⁵⁰

During the spring of 1974—a few months after Rockefeller left office in December 1973 and as Watergate increasingly preoccupied the nation—discussions of reforming New York's campaign-finance laws rose to the fore. Years of talk about the need for reform within the state legislature without any implementation turned into action when legislative leaders responded to the public's renewed concern about campaign finance by initiating an investigation of the campaign laws, which were described as a "constellation of loopholes," in the summer of 1973.⁵¹ With almost no debate and little time to read the final bill, which was negotiated in private by the Republican legislative leadership, the state legislature passed campaign-reform laws almost unanimously. The new laws, which would take effect June 1, 1974, instituted a bi-partisan, salaried four-person Board of Elections that would police and enforce campaign laws and imposed a fifty-cent-per-registered-voter

⁴⁹ Bernard Stengren, "Morgenthau Hits Governor's Aides," *New York Times*, September 28, 1962, 21; Laymond Robinson, "Morgenthau Sees Rise in State Debt," *New York Times*, October 5, 1962, 11; "Rockefeller for Governor," *New York Times*, October 16, 1962, 38; "For Governor: Rockefeller (R)," *Newsday*, October 15, 1962, 37; John I. Snyder Jr., "Rockefeller's Absenteeism," *New York Times*, October 26, 1962, 29.

⁵⁰ "Text of Rockefeller's Message Opening the 1960 Session of the State Legislature," *New York Times*, January 7, 1960, 18; New York, Governor, and Nelson A. Rockefeller, *Public Papers of Nelson A. Rockefeller*. [Albany, N.Y.]: [State of New York], 1960, 1496–1497; Robert H. Connery, "Nelson A. Rockefeller as Governor," in Robert H. Connery and Gerald Benjamin, eds., *Governing New York State: The Rockefeller Years* (New York: Academy of Political Science, 1974), 10.

⁵¹ "Plugging the Holes in N.Y. Campaign Funding Law," *New York Times*, March 10, 1974, 197.

limit on statewide campaigns, which would limit gubernatorial candidates at that time to spending \$4.5 million in general elections. Individual donors were limited to \$150,000 for all political purposes a year. Candidates were limited to spending 5 percent of the cost of a statewide campaign or \$250,000 for general elections (\$105,000 for primaries) or 50 percent on local campaigns, while corporations were limited to \$5,000. The *New York Times* Editorial Board, which critiqued the law for failing to move the state toward publicly financed elections, did express hope that the law was “a partial step toward curbing campaign expenses in New York.” Frank Lynn of the *New York Times* speculated that if the bill became law, it would not only reform campaign-finance practices in the wake of Watergate, it would strengthen political parties who would now be able to exercise more authority over the nominating process by disallowing wealthy candidates from funding their own campaigns or paying their own consultants and advisers outside the party apparatus. He noted that a number of Democratic political hopefuls during the current election cycle had already exceeded the limits designated by the new law either because of the use of their own money or their reliance on a single major donor who had agreed to guarantee loans that exceeded the new limits.⁵² While the press concluded that the new laws would end the era of Rockefeller-style campaign spending, the reforms were generally seen as a response to the revelations of Watergate not the actions of Rockefeller. New York was not an outlier; the majority of states enacted campaign finance laws in this period.⁵³

The loss of huge infusions of Rockefeller cash in 1974—due to increased scrutiny of the family and New York’s new campaign finance laws—was particularly significant for Republicans. That November, Malcolm Wilson, Rockefeller’s longtime lieutenant governor, lost his reelection bid. He received \$50,500 from the Rockefellers for his \$1,684,403 campaign, in comparison to the family’s \$4,254,500 contribution to

⁵² Frank Lynn, “Bill Threatens Influence of ‘Fat Cats,’” *New York Times*, April 8, 1974, 28.

⁵³ By June 1975, thirty-five states enacted campaign-finance laws. Most of the reforms imitated the federal campaign-financing laws passed after Watergate. Francis X. Clines, “Albany Approves Bill to Oversee Campaign Funds,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1974, 1; “...Reform, Albany Style,” *New York Times*, May 15, 1974, 44; Frank Lynn, “The Spending Laws, Loopholes and All, Are Changing Politics,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1974, 205; John R. Owens and Edward C. Olson, “Campaign Spending and the Electoral Process in California, 1966–1974,” *Western Political Quarterly* 30, 4 (1977): 493–512.

Rockefeller's reported \$7,200,000 1970 campaign. Meanwhile his Democratic challenger's brother, Edward M. Carey, gave close to \$1 million to Hugh Carey's primary and general election campaigns. It cannot be determined if this disparity cost Wilson the election, but it undoubtedly put the type of expensive media campaigns Rockefeller waged out of reach. Judith Bender of *Newsday* observed at the time, "Once all that was necessary to fill the moneybags was a call to one of the candidate's brothers; now there are calls by harried GOP money-raisers to reluctant Republican givers."⁵⁴ While neighboring states such as Connecticut and New Jersey enhanced their campaign-finance laws after this period, New York's laws have remained essentially the same since 1976. In 1998, Clifford J. Levy of the *New York Times* described New York's "Watergate-era laws" as "so lenient that candidates in this year's contests face few if any restrictions." As of the twenty-first century, New York has earned the reputation of having some of the laxest campaign finance laws in the nation.⁵⁵

A New Level of Scrutiny

Less than two weeks after Nixon resigned in disgrace, President Ford announced from the Oval Office on August 20, 1974, that Rockefeller was his nominee to fill the role of vice president. Soon after the announcement, Rockefeller fielded questions from an emboldened post-Watergate press corps that ushered in a new level of scrutiny previously unknown to the veteran politician. A third of the questions were about Rockefeller's finances, his willingness to put his fortune in a trust if he were confirmed, and whether or not he would release his tax returns.⁵⁶ The confirmation hearings resulted in multiple days

⁵⁴ The *New York Times* reported that Edward Carey, owner of the New England Petroleum Corporation, gave "close to a million...in one form or another." Frank Lynn, "Buck Fever," *New York Times*, June 18, 1978, E1; Judith Bender, "Rockefeller Money Off the Ticket, Too," *Newsday*, October 29, 1974, 32.

⁵⁵ Levy noted that New York limited donors to \$41,400 in contributions to gubernatorial candidates in 1998, while Connecticut and New Jersey set the same limit at \$5,000 and \$4,200 respectively. Malbin and Brusoe, "Campaign Finance Policy in the State and City of New York," 79–109. Clifford J. Levy, "New York Lags as Neighbors Toughen Campaign Fund Laws," *New York Times*, May 6, 1998, B1.

⁵⁶ "Remarks by President and Rockefeller," *New York Times*, August 21, 1974, 25.

of testimony from Rockefeller and various witnesses before Congress, months of speculation and leaked information to the press, and a rare opportunity for Americans to question the role of money in politics. Two months after Rockefeller’s nomination, Frank Lynn remarked on the singular nature of the confirmation process that probed the former governor in a manner unknown on the campaign trail or within U.S. politics. “Rockefeller now finds himself in a truly unique situation, the only possible situation in which he will probably have to disclose—either to some members of Congress or the entire country—all the uses of his and his family’s fortune,” Lynn wrote. “If he had run for Vice President or President, such disclosure would not be necessary, even if his fortune became a campaign issue.”⁵⁷ Whether or not Rockefeller hoped to limit his financial disclosures to congressional committees, he released documentation days before his initial testimony on September 23 that valued his personal wealth at \$182.5 million.⁵⁸



President Gerald Ford shakes Nelson Rockefeller’s hand after he nominates him to fill the role of vice president as First Lady Betty Ford and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger applaud, August 20, 1974. (COURTESY OF ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER.)

⁵⁷ Frank Lynn, “Rockefeller and Money: Not the Usual Problem,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1974, 235.

⁵⁸ “Rockefeller Adds Up His Assets and Gets \$182.5 Million Total,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 1974, 30.

The possibility of a Rockefeller in the White House was cause for concern—or at least, a moment for pause—for many in the public and Congress because of his unique status as a descendant of John D. Rockefeller, rather than the size of his personal fortune or the proper role of the wealthy in politics. Democratic Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, during a line of questioning described by the press as the most stringent, raised this point to Rockefeller during his first day of testimony:

Even though your great wealth virtually places you beyond the pale of political corruption, the fact that you will be Vice President and that you could later become President means that your family's colossal economic power will then be harnessed with great political power. Will this not lead, as a matter of course, to greater enrichment of the Rockefeller family holdings; would it not lead to a Rockefeller stranglehold on many areas of the national economy and in the final analysis, to a degree of a political power infinitely greater than the power with which either of these high offices would clothe the ordinary person of average financial means?⁵⁹

Byrd affirmed the public's concern about an unelected Rockefeller entering the White House, while also voicing the belief that wealth could make public officeholders insusceptible to corruption. He also diminished concerns about wealthy officials when he noted that there were no laws that required a president or vice president to divest his or her fortune or place it in a trust.⁶⁰ While Rockefeller may have found these discussions uncomfortable—he labored mightily, although unconvincingly, to assure the committee that his family was not as powerful as it seemed—there was a perfunctory nature to the hearings, which television networks declined to air because Rockefeller's confirmation was considered a given.⁶¹

⁵⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 81.

⁶⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 79–83.

⁶¹ Standard Oil had been divided into thirty-three companies to restore competition. Nicholas von Hoffman found that a close reading of Standard & Poor's Register revealed that while the Rockefeller

In the weeks after his initial testimony, however, Rockefeller's financial disclosures, rather than questioning from senators, revealed that he had a practice of giving large quantities of money, under the guise of being loans, to public officials. In October, Rockefeller sent a letter to the chairs of the congressional committees holding hearings on his nomination to explain that an Internal Revenue Service audit determined that he owed an additional \$903,718 in taxes due to underpayments during the previous five years. As a result of the findings, Rockefeller would pay the back taxes and submit to the congressional committees a revised ten-year summary of his federal income tax returns and tax payments.⁶² The public also learned about questionable campaign expenditures that jeopardized his confirmation and triggered a second set of Senate hearings in November.⁶³ Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina called for additional hearings in response to these revelations, in particular, a \$550,000 gift to Rockefeller aide William J. Ronan. Ronan had borrowed that amount from Rockefeller over a seventeen-year period, and the former governor forgave the debt in 1974 after Ronan stepped down as the inaugural head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and before he assumed the unsalaried chairmanship of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.⁶⁴ A less sensational revelation was the scope of the Rockefeller family's investment in the governor's political career. Rockefeller and his immediate family, including his stepmother, spent over \$20 million on his four gubernatorial and two formal presidential campaigns. His stepmother spent \$11 million alone.⁶⁵

family and its associates tried to deflect attention from the family's wealth, their representatives held at least 118 seats on the boards of ninety-seven companies with combined assets of \$70 billion. In total, Hoffman estimated the family were on the boards of companies whose assets totaled \$640 billion, or the equivalent of half of the gross national product. Nicholas von Hoffman, "A Matter of Relative Wealth," *Washington Post*, December 7, 1974, B3.

⁶² Linda Chalmers, "Rockefeller Owes \$903,718 to I.R.S. for Last 5 Years," *New York Times*, October 19, 1974, 1.

⁶³ "Taking the Gloves Off with Rockefeller," *Newsday*, November 11, 1974, 40.

⁶⁴ David A. Andelman, "Ronan Is Still a Paid Rockefeller Adviser," *New York Times*, October 9, 1974, 30; "Hearing Urged on Rocky's Gifts," *Newsday*, October 9, 1974, 9.

⁶⁵ Rockefeller told Senator James B. Allen from Alabama during the November hearings that he not only spent money on traditional campaign expenditures but also on research and other activities that would not be considered traditional campaign spending. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 552-554.



Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger visit in the office of the vice president. The two men had developed a two decades' long relationship, in which Rockefeller served as Kissinger's patron, after meeting when Rockefeller served as a special assistant in the Eisenhower administration, January 1975. (COURTESY OF ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER.)

The congressional hearings revealed numerous advantages enjoyed by a wealthy politician that were beyond the reach of average politicians, but the hearings highlighted a lack of consensus on whether or not the nation should be concerned. Senator Claiborne Pell, a Democrat from Rhode Island, credited the probing nature of the inquiry to a “new post-Watergate morality” that put all politicians in “goldfish bowls.” Pell, who said he was certain Rockefeller was qualified to serve as vice president, concluded that the level of inquiry was somewhat unfair to Rockefeller because previous presidential candidates never experienced a comparable examination. The senator reasoned, however, that the public required additional assurance in the wake of Watergate.⁶⁶ Arthur Goldberg, who requested to appear before the committee to discuss the Rockefeller-financed biography about him, warned that this was a positive development that should not be ended prematurely. Goldberg rejected the idea that Rockefeller was being held to a “new political morality”; the

⁶⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 523, 692.

question for him was solely an issue of the public being entitled to “openness and candor from those holding or aspiring to public office.” “Instead of exacting too high a standard from public officials, the far greater danger,” warned Goldberg, “is that we all too quickly return to business as usual.”⁶⁷

The exchange between Pell and Goldberg demonstrated that some hoped the hearings would inspire a fundamental reassessment of how little disclosure the public had demanded of politicians in the past and what should change moving forward. Pell’s focus on Watergate reflects the reluctance among some members of the Senate who hoped to limit the focus of the inquiry. Conservative members of Congress, such as Senators Barry Goldwater of Arizona, William Lloyd Scott of Virginia, and Helms—who ultimately voted against Rockefeller—joined liberals who opposed Rockefeller’s appointment, but their opposition tended to be a response to Rockefeller’s liberal political reputation and affinity for expensive government programs, not his reliance on his personal wealth as a public figure. There was reporting that some conservatives criticized Rockefeller’s taxes and gift giving as a pretext for opposing his nomination, but as the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized, “It would not be unfair to suggest that the conservative disenchantment relates more directly to Rockefeller’s moderate philosophy than to his personal probity.” The congressional hearings that resulted in a review of Rockefeller’s practices in New York revealed that the businessman-politician benefited from his wealth in innumerable ways that sparked concern in the public. While Rockefeller’s confirmation was longer than expected—Congress approved his nomination with votes of 90 to 7 in the Senate and 287 to 128 in the House—discussions about the impact of the advantages granted to wealthy and well-connected politicians were limited.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 523, 692.

⁶⁸ Of the 39-member delegation from New York in the House, all 17 Republicans voted to confirm Rockefeller, while 10 of the 22 Democrats voted against confirmation, 9 voted yes, and 3 were recorded as not voting. Overall, Rockefeller’s dissenters in the House tended to be liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans as well. Liberals who opposed Rockefeller cited his role in the retaking of the Attica Correctional Facility that resulted in the death of 39 people in 1971 and his advocacy for welfare cuts and harsh drug laws late in his gubernatorial career. “Senate Approves Rockefeller, 90-7,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1974, A1; Linda Charlton, “Senate Ceremony,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1974, 77; Chalmers R. Roberts, “Wealth in America,” *Washington Post*, October 25, 1974, A30; “The Questions About Rockefeller,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 13, 1974, C6.

During the confirmation hearings, Rockefeller labored to downplay the significance of his use of his family wealth to support his campaigns, of which he said the public had been well aware. “We have 18 million people in the State of New York,” explained Rockefeller. “I honestly do not feel that by any stretch of the imagination in the four campaigns that I ran, that it would be fair to say that I bought their votes. I communicated with them as best I could through the media.”⁶⁹ At least some New Yorkers, he surmised, elected him four times because “they would rather know the money came from the candidate rather than some other interest whose motives they did not understand, and that might have strings that they could not see.”⁷⁰ While there was a general awareness of Rockefeller’s use of his wealth to advance his career, a number of strategies were deployed to make it difficult to know exactly how much money was invested by the Rockefellers. Regardless, Rockefeller made the case that the infusion of money in a campaign was not decisive—his costlier failed national campaigns were proof of that. In response to Rockefeller’s assurances to the Senate that the electoral system had ensured that he had not bought his victories, Tom Wicker of the *Times* again expressed skepticism. The funding of the Goldberg biography was an obvious example of how someone like Rockefeller could use his wealth to unfairly tip the scales in his favor.⁷¹ Wicker’s scrutiny of the ease with which a wealthy politician, in particular, could use his or her personal resources to implement their will without the approval of the electorate highlighted fundamental questions about the presence of money in politics.

In the aftermath of Watergate, Congress amended the 1971 Federal Election Campaign Act in a way that would have serious, yet fleeting, repercussions for self-funding candidates like Rockefeller when they sought federal office. The original law stated that no candidate or the candidate’s immediate family could contribute to the campaign out of their personal funds in excess of \$50,000 if running for the office of president or vice president, \$35,000 for the Senate, or \$25,000 for the House. Before the 1971 reform, an individual could contribute up to \$5,000 to an unlimited number of campaign committees

⁶⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 554.

⁷⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Hearings on the Nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller*, 509–510.

⁷¹ Tom Wicker, “Money in Office,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1974, 37.

for a single candidate.⁷² The 1974 amendment to the Campaign Finance Act, which was enacted in the midst of Rockefeller’s confirmation hearings, included sweeping changes. With these reforms in place, no non-candidate could contribute more than \$1,000 to any candidate for a federal office, and a \$5,000 limit was set on individual donations to political committees other than the principal campaign committee. A \$25,000 overall limit was put on individuals who contributed to federal campaigns in a calendar year. Additionally, the amendment extended limitations on candidates and their families giving loans or advances to a campaign. It also limited how much money a candidate could spend on their federal campaign, as well as how much a campaign could spend overall.⁷³ In January 1976, the Supreme Court decided in *Buckley v. Valeo* that limiting a candidate’s ability to contribute to his or her own campaign was a violation of the First Amendment because it restricted “protected political expression.” For the same reason, it ruled that limiting a campaign’s expenditures overall was a violation as well. It did, however, uphold limits on what others could contribute directly to a campaign.⁷⁴ Ultimately, efforts in the 1970s to limit the personal contributions of the wealthy to their own campaigns proved to be no more than a brief deviation from established campaign-finance practice.

Conclusion

Money does not guarantee victory, but the presence of the wealthy in politics, especially those who funded their own campaigns, helped normalize the rising cost of winning elections in the United States. In 1994, David Van Biema and Laurence I. Barrett noted in *Time* magazine that “Almost every state has at least one free-spending plutocrat.” The trend of expensive campaigns extended beyond federal elections: “Governorships, which used to go for a mere million or so, also appear to have appreciated in value.” The authors credited this “advance of the plutocrats,” to public skepticism of career politicians, the rising cost of

⁷² Joel L. Fleishman, “The 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments: The Shortcomings of Good Intentions,” *Duke Law Journal* 1975, no. 4 (September 1975): 855.

⁷³ The \$1,000 limit has since increased to \$2,700. Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments of 1974, Pub. L. No. 93-443, 88 Stat. 1263 (1974); Nicholas W. Allard, “A Landmark Decision Turns Forty: A Conversation on *Buckley v. Valeo*,” *Journal of Law and Policy* 25, no. 1 (2016): 16.

⁷⁴ *Buckley V. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).

media advertisements, challengers needing large sums of money to compete against incumbents who had established political action committees working on their behalf, and *Buckley v. Valeo*. Aided by weak campaign-finance laws, New York became an environment especially amenable to money in politics.⁷⁵ Rockefeller's example would appear to be replicated in 1982, for example, when Lewis E. Lehrman largely financed his own campaign as a first-time gubernatorial candidate and almost led an ailing Republican Party to victory against Democrat Mario Cuomo.⁷⁶ Whether they spent wealthy donors' money or looked closer to home, New York's gubernatorial candidates spent increasingly astronomical sums. With the aid of financiers who flouted campaign finance laws, Governor George Pataki earned the reputation of being one of the state's most prodigious fundraisers, accumulating nearly \$15 million dollars for his 1994 campaign, which bested three-term Democratic incumbent Mario Cuomo's total by \$3 million; for his successful 1998 reelection bid, Pataki accumulated a war chest of more than \$20 million. When an upstart Andrew Cuomo challenged the Democratic establishment in 2002, headlines referred to him as a serious contender because of his ability to amass huge sums—\$8.8 million five months before the primary—in preparation for a campaign he ended right before the primary. According to his filings with the State Board of Elections, Cuomo's coffers were due to wealthy donors and bundlers who consolidated large contributions from individuals in high-end and commercial real estate, private investment firms, and his immediate family.⁷⁷ New York's

⁷⁵ The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 and its amendments of 1974, 1976, and 1979 made it possible for corporations, trade associations, and labor unions to form political action committees. In 1974, PACs raised \$12.5 million; by 1982 that number increased to \$84 million. Larry Sabato, "PACs, Parties and Presidents," *Society* 22, no. 4 (May 1985): 57; David Van Biema and Laurence I. Barrett, "What Money Can Buy," *Time*, June 20, 1994, 35.

⁷⁶ Lieutenant Governor Mario Cuomo defeated Lehrman 51 to 48 percent. Lehrman and his brother spent \$3.7 million of a record-breaking \$5.7 million primary campaign to win the Republican nomination. Frank Lynn, "Lehrman Outspends Rivals with \$5.7 Million Primary," *New York Times*, August 24, 1982, B1; Michael Oreskes, "Lehrman Concedes," *New York Times*, November 4, 1982, A1.

⁷⁷ Clifford J. Levy, "New York Lags as Neighbors Toughen Campaign Fund Laws," *New York Times*, May 6, 1998, B1; Clifford J. Levy, "Many Donors to Pataki Do State Business," *New York Times*, October 27, 1998, A1; Clifford J. Levy, "Albany Is Failing in Effort to Limit Campaign Donors," *New York Times*, December 28, 1998, A1; Richard Perez-Peña, "Cuomo's Campaign Engine Is Young and Well-Connected," *New York Times*, April 15, 2002, B1.

turn-of-the-twenty-first-century statewide public office seekers mixed old and new financing strategies to increase spending on the state’s elections.

In 1988, New York City became the exception to the rule in the Empire State when it passed New York’s first public-financing law intended to limit the influence of real-estate developers in city politics; but what was generally seen as a positive development still allowed wealthy candidates to spend unlimited sums on their own campaigns. The law, which was intended to make running for public office feasible for more people and lower the pressure to raise money, limited the expenditures of candidates who received public funding. Wealthy candidates, however, did not have to limit their contributions or spending, but once they exceeded the limits other candidates could do the same. The result of the city’s effort to limit the influence of wealthy donors, without restraining wealthy candidates, was fully realized in 2001 when Michael Bloomberg ran for mayor against Mark Green.⁷⁸ While Green’s campaign spent \$16.2 million—the third highest expenditure for a non-presidential candidate in 2000-2001—he was far outspent by Bloomberg’s campaign expenditures, which totaled \$73.9 million. Ultimately, Bloomberg bested Green 49 to 47 percent. The campaigns’ filings revealed that 14,000 people contributed to Green’s campaign in comparison to Bloomberg’s single donor, Michael Bloomberg. Bloomberg’s ability to spend \$30 million in the final three weeks of the campaign was an exaggerated version of Rockefeller’s practice of outspending Democratic opponents.⁷⁹ Green credited the “trend of self-financed candidates” to the *Buckley v. Valeo* decision, the financial pressures of campaigning, and Nelson Rockefeller’s example, but twentieth- and twenty-

⁷⁸ During hearings to investigate the city’s campaign finance laws, Donald Trump testified in 1988 that he used eighteen so-called “dummy corporations” to exceed the \$5,000 corporate limit for campaign donations, resulting in a \$50,000 contribution to Democrat Andrew J. Stein’s successful campaign for city council president. Frank Lynn, “Investigation of Donations Will Expand in New York,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1988, B1; Frank Lynn, “New York’s Campaign Finance Law,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1989, 24; Frank Lynn, “Finance Law for Candidates Nearing Goals,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1989, B1; Michael J. Malbin, Peter W. Bruscoe, and Brendan Glavin, “Small Donors, Big Democracy: New York City’s Matching Funds as a Model for the Nation and States,” *Election Law Journal* 11, no. 2 (2012): 3–20.

⁷⁹ Before running for mayor, Green served as New York City’s first public advocate, the second highest ranking position in city government from 1994 to 2001. Mark Green, *Selling Out: How Big Corporate Money Buys Elections, Rams Through Legislation, and Betrays Our Democracy* (New York: Regan Books, 2001), 48–49, 10–11.

first-century wealthy candidates were following in the example of generations of wealthy candidates who have had an outsized role in politics. The *New York Times*, which had endorsed Green, concluded, “Mr. Bloomberg invested what is believed to be over \$50 million into a campaign in which voters came to know him almost exclusively through his carefully tailored TV ads. It was Mr. Bloomberg’s identification with Mayor Giuliani that was his most powerful weapon...” Bloomberg would go on to continued success, while surpassing his 2001 campaign spending record in subsequent mayoral campaigns.⁸⁰

While wealthy politicians most often assert their influence over campaign spending, Rockefeller’s use of his personal wealth to augment his activities as governor and standard bearer of the New York Republican Party provides an example of how these figures can shape politics in less perceptible ways as well. When Harriman was in office, he and his wife used personal funds to cover their expenses, which far exceeded the budget allowed by the state, while entertaining state Democrats at the Executive Mansion. At his first inauguration in 1959, Rockefeller paid \$40,000—the equivalent of four-fifths of the gubernatorial salary—for his inaugural ball, which featured jazz singer Cab Calloway and the New York City Ballet.⁸¹ Rockefeller’s spending dwarfed Harriman’s, but his inauguration seems quaint in comparison to Pataki’s three-day extravaganza in 1995 that cost \$500,000 and featured a laser light show, a performance by the Albany Symphony Orchestra, and a nineteen-gun salute. The major difference between 1959 and 1995 was that Pataki’s celebration was funded by lobbyists, campaign contributors, and businesses who gave contributions to a private corporation created by the governor to solicit donations. Pataki’s reliance on corporate sponsors for his inauguration troubled New Yorkers more than the personal expenditures of Harriman and Rockefeller, but perhaps all three examples should raise concern.⁸²

⁸⁰ The *New York Times* reported in 2009 that Bloomberg spent \$74 million or \$99 per vote in 2001, \$85 million or \$112 per vote in 2005, and \$102 million or \$174 per vote for his narrow victory in 2009. Bloomberg could not run for a fourth term in office due to term limits. “Mayor-Elect Michael Bloomberg,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2001, A22; Michael Barbaro, “With Late Rush, Mayor Spent \$102 Million on Election,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2009, A14.

⁸¹ Abramson, *Spanning the Century*, 522; Smith, *On His Own Terms*, 295.

⁸² Although Pataki promised to follow state campaign-finance laws and allow the public to see who donated to the inauguration, he failed to do so, in part, by dissolving the corporation before the



During his first term in office, Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Mary Clark Rockefeller inspect pieces from Rockefeller's art collection soon after they were installed in the New York State Executive Mansion, circa 1959. (COURTESY OF ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER.)

Rockefeller demonstrated for fourteen years that the governorship is what you make of it by bankrolling the maintenance of the Executive Chamber. By not setting limits and implementing little oversight, politics, and even governance, remains a sport that favors the wealthy. As Rockefeller paid "to do what he wanted when he wanted to," as his aide described it, he enjoyed a unique benefit of the doubt even as the public increasingly expressed concern about the rising cost of campaigns. Even though compelling Rockefeller to release his tax forms and heightened scrutiny more generally proved effective in giving the public newfound insight into Rockefeller's use of wealth in 1974, his nomination hearings proved an aberration rather than the new normal. Rockefeller's huge injections of money to fund an extravagant executive office with personal staffers on his private payroll did not mean that all of his successors would be able to do the same. However, he set a precedent that future politicians could emulate if they chose to and, without sustained oversight, might even receive praise from voters in search of savings.

required filing date. James Dao, "Pataki Will Not Open Books on Inaugural Fund," *New York Times*, November 17, 1995, A1.

The prominent political scientist Herbert Alexander, whose efforts to track campaign costs in the 1960s provided the data reformers cited when they argued for campaign-finance reform, believed the nation owed a debt to wealthy politicians. Unlike reformers and skeptical journalists, Alexander argued that rising campaign costs and the participation of wealthy candidates were not cause for concern. While he acknowledged that wealthy candidates were advantaged over their political rivals—he mentioned factors such as their access to credit, wealthy friends, and their ability to employ permanent campaign staffs—their participation strengthened the two-party system because they “g[a]ve voice to controversial issues or minority interests.” Alexander cites Robert Kennedy’s 1968 presidential campaign to demonstrate that wealthy candidates were often representatives of the lower classes. Kennedy, in Alexander’s estimation, “gave representation to the black and the poor as few other candidates have done.”⁸³ He does not mention the possibility that if campaigns did not require so much financing and fundraising, perhaps those black and poor citizens could more often seek office and self-advocate. Alexander’s conclusions demonstrate that it is not just cynical or disaffected voters who favor wealthy newcomers over career politicians. His assessment reflects a perception dating back to this nation’s founding that the wealthy are uniquely suited to leadership.

The story of Nelson Rockefeller and wealth in New York politics is a unique example, in part because of the scale of Rockefeller’s spending and in part due to the excesses of campaign expenditures in New York more generally. Still, it is a case study that encourages us to think critically about how historical forces have normalized an exaggerated place for money in American politics. Failure to scrutinize this privileged path to power risks making the administration of our government the exclusive territory of the wealthy, who allow average citizens to participate at their pleasure. Rockefeller faced far more scrutiny in 1974 than fellow New Yorker and forty-fifth president of the United States Donald Trump, but that fact obscures a more complicated history about the politics of wealth in the United States that demands more inquiry.

⁸³ Alexander, *Money in Politics*, 40–43.