# The Ever-Shrinking Middle Ground:
# Nelson Rockefeller in the Face of Reaganism

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The chants of "We Want Barry" echoed throughout San Francisco's Cow Palace arena on the afternoon of July 14, 1964, searing the evident shift among the delegates of the National Republican Convention as much as the hopes of the New York governor who stood before them. Just a few years earlier, Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) was considered the unquestionable front-runner for the 1964 GOP nomination. By that July afternoon, however, he resided in the crosshairs of the conservative Right, attempting to issue a formal repudiation of extremist elements that were "wholly alien to the broad middle course" of "mainstream" Republicanism. The rightward drift of the party could not have been clearer to Rockefeller. For amid the interrupting chants of "We Want Barry," he undoubtedly realized that the moderate Republicanism he had championed in his public career now stood as isolated as the podium he clung to. Barry Goldwater's defeat at the hands of Lyndon Johnson four months later offered little vindication for the New York governor. Within a year, new political chants would arise in California that further propelled the wave of polarization in the GOP. Such chants were neither from the Right nor directly associated with the heated issues of civil rights, Vietnam, or student protests. Rather they were the chants of "Huelga" (strike) led by Cesar Chavez and

encompassing a new political issue that would ultimately split the business-labor coalition of Rockefeller's middle-ground: grapes.

My research in the political papers of NAR is part of a larger project that uses the strikes and boycotts of the United Farm Workers (UFW) as a lens to explore shifts in party politics and political economy between 1965 and the early 1980s. Beginning in September 1965, the UFW commenced a movement to organize farm labor in California, which culminated in the international grape boycott of 1968-1970. The success of this early movement spurred the union to continue similar activism in other crops nationwide throughout the 1970s and early 1980s in its attempt to garner the same rights and protection for farm-workers as those enjoyed by their industrial counterparts. Sitting at the confluences of race, labor, and industry, farm-worker activism placed both Democrats and Republicans in a precarious political position—a position that refracts new light on party reorganization and political economy during the era. Within Republican ranks—the focus of this essay—the United Farm Worker movement allows us to trace this party reorganization in more accurate ways. Predominately concentrated on the topics of Vietnam, civil rights, and the various facets of social conservatism, the historical literature has richly charted the conservative ascendance while neglecting the fall of the Republican middle ground—a ground held by moderates like Rockefeller. A look at this middle ground complicates the general narrative on the rise of the Right in the literature, demonstrating that the conservative ascendance was not a smooth trajectory from Goldwater to Reagan. Rather it was a contested development, as moderates like Rockefeller attempted to maintain a balanced Republicanism that embraced corporate liberalism and nourished a business-labor coalition. The files of NAR and his top administrators, Diane Van Wie and George Hinman, offer an invaluable lens of examination into the Republican Party of the sixties era, just as Chavez and the UFW provide a

penetrating look at political economy in this party reorganization. Indeed, it was amid the calls of "Huelga" that the cresting wave of polarization within the GOP was placed in sharp relief, as the middle ground of Rockefeller came eye-to-eye with the conservative landscape of Reaganism.

The United Farm Workers movement had rising implications for agricultural labor outside of California, particularly on the Eastern Seaboard. Beyond the lighted skyline of Manhattan, New York stood as one of the nation's major agricultural states, producing a bounty of fruits, vegetables, and livestock products. In fact, by the 1960s the Empire State ranked third nationally in dairy products, second in apples, and supplemented Eastern markets with an array of fresh fruits and vegetables alongside California's mammoth production. To be sure, the importance of agriculture was not lost on NAR. The family had long held an interest in agriculture, from its 179-acre Pocantico Hills farm to the host of agricultural-centered programs of the Rockefeller Foundation, which paved the way for what was later coined "the Green Revolution." As governor, Rockefeller sought and earned a broad support of New York business, which just as much included those operating in the fields and orchards as those under the skyline of Manhattan. Yet, Rockefeller was also concern about agricultural labor. As early as 1964, the governor's Interdepartmental Committee on Farm Labor issued a report detailing the number of programs provided for the 50,000 migrant farm-workers annually employed in the fields and orchards of the Empire State. Such reforms included health and childcare services, housing, education, and a state standard for agricultural working conditions. "The seasonal worker is a key figure in the State's agricultural economy," Rockefeller asserted in the report's introduction, "and the State of New York aims to treat him well."

The governor's public concern for farm-workers fit squarely within the middle ground of moderate Republicanism. Throughout his governorship, he championed business friendly policies alongside an array of state funded social programs, placing New York largely at the forefront in the areas of housing, public education, healthcare, and environmental reform. Moreover, as one of the earliest Republicans to actively support civil rights, Rockefeller's programs stood untainted by racial and gender discrimination, while the governor himself advanced an affirmative action program that led to a dramatic increase of women and minorities employed in state government. NAR's middle ground also included labor, as he garnered the long-time support of the AFL-CIO and pledged to "fight any effort to alter the historic position of the Republican Party…in opposition to a so-called 'right-to-work' law." Indeed, the moderate Republicanism of the New York governor rested on a diverse coalition. Yet, what remained of this middle ground within the national ranks of the GOP after the Goldwater onslaught stood to face another challenge emanating from California by 1966.

Four months after over three thousand farm-workers joined Cesar Chavez and his fledgling union in a strike and boycott against two of California's corporate grape growers, Ronald Reagan formally announced his candidacy for the governorship against two-term Democratic incumbent Edmund "Pat" Brown. Reagan's public career had plodded a path of paradox in the preceding decade, as the former actor and president of the Screen Actors Guild became the corporate spokesman for General Electric, championing a laissez-faire message of anti-communism and anti-labor. In fact, Reagan wasted no time indicating his stance on the farm labor situation erupting in California during his speech. Holding up a catsup bottle, the Republican challenger warned that there would be "28 million fewer of these manufactured . . . [when] the Secretary of Labor and our own state government finish their experiments in reform

among farm-workers and completely cancel out the Bracero program." Terminated without renewal months before, the bi-national program between Mexico and the U.S. had ushered in some four million Mexican workers into the nation's agricultural fields during its twenty-three year tenure, supplying American agribusiness—in California as well as New York—with an army of cheap, malleable labor. Indeed, the precipitous drop in cheap foreign workers that resulted from the program's demise opened the door for Chavez's organizational efforts. So too did it raise the concern of agribusiness and the corporate backers of Ronald Reagan. For underpinning Reagan's criticisms of the program's cancelation was not as much alarm over labor scarcity as it was worker unionism and the UFW.

Rockefeller himself had plodded a fine path between New York agriculture and organized labor since coming to office. In his 1964 campaign literature, migrant labor stood as an import addendum to pamphlets that touted the governor's labor track record, noting that Rocky had not only "been a friend and supporter of responsible free trade unionism," but also under his tenure "migrant farm workers were guaranteed greater wage protection and better housing and working conditions." Yet, in an interview with the *San Francisco Monitor,* the governor avoided inquiries about if he favored renewal of the Bracero Program, stating that since the chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture "does not intend to sponsor the legislation authorizing renewal of the Bracero Program…there is no prospect for renewal." To be sure, Rockefeller's evasion represented more than just the adroit tact of a seasoned politician. For while touting that "the plight of migrant farm workers is of deep concern to every American," the governor's tepid words underscored the volatility of the farm labor issue, and how such "concern" could upset the fragile political balance of the middle ground. Like many moderates on both sides of political aisle, Rockefeller most likely wished farm labor issues—heightened by

UFW activism—could be resolved without pulling New York into its orbit of controversy, and thus maintaining the moderate coalition of business and labor.

On the West Coast, however, aspirations for such a coalition were quickly disappearing as UFW activism collided with the state's gubernatorial race to create a prevailing wind of polarization on the California political landscape. NAR himself had warned the country against this emerging trend, appearing on television in 1964 to denounce the "effort[s] of right-wing extremists to turn the Republican Party away from its traditional path of moderation"—efforts "nowhere…more intense than in the State of California." Indeed, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and Watts Riots of the following year further fueled these efforts, while also creating a host of pitfalls for moderates like Governor Brown and Republican hopeful George Christopher. Yet as Watts and Berkeley quickly became the litmus tests for the social issues of race and sixties activism, it was the UFW and its challenge to California's primary industry that placed the vital tenets of the moderate business–labor coalition at political risk. And just as Ronald Reagan quickly capitalized on Watts and Berkeley, he seized upon the farm labor issued and the timidity it received from both Brown and Christopher. He denounced the cancelation of the Bracero Program and the increased federal regulation of Mexican guest workers as a "ridiculous experiment that made farmers in California sociological guinea pigs." Moderates like Brown and Christopher stewed in silence. As Cesar Chavez and the UFW completed a 300-mile march to Sacramento on Easter Sunday, Reagan noted the absence of prominent politicians while also criticizing the march as an "Easter egg roll…of professional bleeding hearts." By the summer of 1966, the rising activism of the UFW had placed an important demarcation on California's political table, making the entities of business and labor no longer part of a moderate coalition, but rather a political decision between one or the other. Pat Brown and George

Christopher desperately tried to cling to the middle ground and garner the support of both. Ronald Reagan made his position (and that eventually of the Republican Party) clear—he was choosing business.

In the midst of his own successful reelection campaign, NAR kept a critical eye on Reagan and California, as seen in the correspondence of his long-time advisor George Hinman. A month after Reagan announced his candidacy, the Rockefeller Administration celebrated George Christopher's run for the governor's seat, "the moderate representation in the California primary" Hinman trumpeted, "and of course we hope he can prevail." The last Republican mayor of San Francisco, Christopher fit squarely within the moderate mold of Rockefeller Republicanism, championing a host of reform initiatives, urban renewal programs, and a strong civil rights stand during his two-term tenure. Over the months, Rockefeller and his advisors continued to be "intensely interested in how the primary is developing for George Christopher," only to have their hopes dashed as the winds of polarization blew much stronger in Reagan's favor than that of the San Francisco Mayor. "We of course were greatly disappointed with the result in California," Hinman conceded after the June primary, "things are certainly moving to the right out there in a most depressing way." Contrary to the celebratory image often invoked of Reagan leading bewildered Republicans from the wilderness, moderates like Rockefeller and Hinman cringed at the news of Reagan's primary victory and the thought of him as governor. "I know what a cruel dilemma Reagan's nomination put you in…I know how deeply you feel about Reagan, feelings which I share" Hinman confided to San Francisco Republican and Rockefeller supporter Bill Brinton, concluding that the "best of a very bad situation would be for the moderates to try to use their leverage now that Reagan needs their support." Many moderates felt the "cruel dilemma" which Hinman discussed, especially in light of what became known that

year as the Eleventh Commandment — thou shalt not speak ill of any fellow Republican. Covering the governor's right flank with the 1968 presidential primary in calculation, Hinman adhered to the commandment when writing to Reagan supporters such as Jeremiah Sullivan of Crocker National Bank, U.S. District Judge Thurmond Clarke, and Marco Hellman whose corporate links included Wells Fargo Bank and Twentieth Century Fox. To these conservative party loyalists Hinman gushed with enthusiasm, extending congratulations on behalf of Rockefeller regarding Reagan's "smashing victory."

The Eleventh Commandment, however, did not preclude helping a fellow Republican's opponent, which as a 1966 correspondence from Pat Brown thanking the New York governor for "his fine campaign advice*"* suggests, is exactly what NAR did in his attempt to salvage the middle ground. While the historical record remains unclear regarding the level and type of aid Rockefeller provided to the California incumbent, it nonetheless highlights the fact that outside party identity Rockefeller was much more akin politically to Pat Brown than to Ronald Reagan. Indeed, Brown was an adherent to the middle ground. During his eight-year tenure, he enacted a host of state-funded social and educational programs, was a strong advocate for civil rights, and nurtured the moderate business – labor coalition. So too, did Brown adroitly plod a fine path between California agribusiness and farm labor. Yet by 1966, the middle ground of California had already begun to fracture amid the polarizing winds of the previous two years. For just as Ronald Reagan chose business during the campaign, the array of social activism—especially that of the UFW—forced Pat Brown to hang his electoral hat on the pegs of civil rights and labor, as the governor finally extended public support to Cesar Chavez and the UFW by summer's end. Neither the union's "Viva Pat Brown" endorsement, nor Rockefeller's help, proved enough to buoy Brown's sinking ticket. Reagan's landslide victory of almost a million votes in the

November election surely illustrated how effectively he tapped into the anxieties of the state's white majority, most notably seen in the heated issues of Proposition 14, Watts, and Berkeley. Often missed in this social focus of the conservative ascendance, however, is how thoroughly California's corporate giants swarmed into the camp of Reagan and the Republican Party — an event not lost on the moderates of both parties. If Brown's defeat revealed anything, it was the changing political currents of business and the steady erosion of the middle ground.

In the wake of Reagan's victory, Rockefeller and his advisors continued to espouse hopes of moderation. "We too have very mixed feelings about the result out there," George Hinman confided to one California associate, "but I believe the realities of governing a state of the size and complexity of California will have a moderating effect… [at least] I very much hope so." In more blunt fashion, Hinman expressed the views of the Rockefeller Administration to friend Sid Levine: "We are all hoping that things will work out better than we have anticipated in California…" To the chagrin of Rockefeller moderates, as well as Chavez and the farm-workers, such hopes of moderation never materialized. Accompanying the new governor to Sacramento in 1967 were the corporate backers that had guided and funded Reagan's political career since the summer of 1965. Called the "Kitchen Cabinet," this group of corporate conservatives proceeded to set up the Reagan Administration in California, selecting the top forty positions in the administration largely from the boardrooms of the Golden State. As George Hinman noted in a report to NAR, "Reagan has leaned heavily on business for appointments to various regulatory positions in which business has a position of interest." Indeed, the appointments in agriculture—California's primary industry—proved no different. Earl Coke, the former agricultural vice president of Bank of America, received the appointment as the State Director of Agriculture, while Allen Grant, a Visalia farmer and president of the California Farm Bureau Federation,

agreed to head the State Board of Agriculture. Next, the "Kitchen Cabinet" named fourteen growers to run the state's Farm Placement Service—the agency in charge of working with the U.S. Department of Labor to supply Mexican guest workers during certified shortages. And just as one would expect from this make up, the corporate conservatism of the Reagan Administration was all business, and no labor. The strikes and activism of the UFW had scored some success throughout 1966 and 1967, gaining a handful of contracts among California grape growers. Yet, Chavez and the farm-workers soon faced a virulence of opposition from the new governor, as Reagan not only publicly condemned the union's movement, but ordered the use of prison labor and welfare recipients as strike breakers. As Hinman reported to Rockefeller, Reagan has "taken an anti-farm labor position — one in support of farm owners exclusively."

The corporate conservatism taking shape under Reagan — the pro-business, anti-labor statism — was something far afield from the middle ground Rockefeller and other moderates politically envisioned for both the GOP and nation. Indeed, it was this conflict of visions that kept high profile Republican moderates like Rockefeller and California Senator Thomas Kuchel from publicly endorsing Reagan during the 1966 campaign. And it was this conflict George Hinman sought to highlight in his research on the prospective 1968 presidential candidates. Hinman's research files resemble an important source of political analysis, laying out both the top Democratic and Republican candidates via their positions on (among other issues) agriculture, labor management, civil rights, and Vietnam. In this spectrum, two significant developments become clear: NAR's moderate position and the shrinking of this middle ground amid intense party polarization on both sides, as seen with McCarthy, Kennedy, and Humphrey on the Left and, especially, Ronald Reagan on the Right. In fact, Hinman's files indicate that the two Republican governors saw eye-to-eye on very little. On Vietnam, Rockefeller opposed

further escalation while Reagan voiced "no confidence" in a peace settlement and championed an escalate-and-finish strategy. Reagan advocated a similar strategy on the home front regarding riots and student protests, advocating firm and swift repression in contrast to Rockefeller's call for peaceful demonstrations and a more nuanced understanding among office holders regarding the arguments and root causes of such dissent. Civil rights represented another issue of contrast, where in juxtaposing the two Republicans Hinman labeled Reagan the "least pro-civil rights of the candidates," noting his opposition to national open housing, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Yet these issues aside, Hinman's files consistently highlight political economy as the biggest separation between Rockefeller's middle ground and the emerging political landscape of Reaganism. In stark contrast to Rockefeller's promotion of social programs for the poor and strong support of organized labor, Reagan characterized welfare as a "$50 billion failure" and often displayed a vociferous anti-labor position. He advocated anti-trust provisions be applied to unions and publicly stated that the criticisms of labor leaders on the use of prison inmates in California fields "remind me of a dog sitting on a sharp rock howling with pain who is too stupid to get up." While Reagan's anti-labor position may have not represented something novel for the fledgling Conservative Right, his dealings with business certainly broke new ground. In a 1964 report on Barry Goldwater, Hinman warned Rockefeller that in regards to the Arizona senator's record on small business, "no attack can be made in this area." Such was not the case for Reagan, as Hinman's files repeatedly link the California governor to the corporate order. His appointments to the state's Public Utility Commission (PUC) offered a lucid case in point—one well documented by Rockefeller's team. Established by progressive Republican Hiram Johnson in 1911 to provide customer-oriented regulation, the PUC under Reagan became filled, as

Hinman observed, with "candidates approved by the industry that is supposed to be regulated." Indeed, the composition of PUC represented a boon for business. The rate increase petition filed with the commission by AT&T's Pacific Coast subsidiary (PT&T), for example, skyrocketed from $6 million in 1966 to $181 million after the election and appointments of Ronald Reagan. NAR's research team documented similar pro-corporate actions, noting the appointment of businessmen to the positions of Labor Commissioner, head of California's Department of Industrial Relations, and the State Industrial Accidents and Workmen's Compensation Appeal Board. It was within this corporate context of Reagan that Rockefeller's administration began to view the farm-worker movement in California, charging the new governor was "solely defending California's large farm owners" and that both his approval of prison labor and opposition to the UFW was all "in order to provide the big farmers with cheap labor."

By the early months of 1968, Rockefeller could no longer avoid the UFW's orbit of controversy, nor the contrasting political currents that separated the landscape of Reaganism and the middle ground he hoped to maintain. Just as the various presidential primary campaigns kicked off around the country, Cesar Chavez announced a national boycott of California grapes. And topping the list of the forty cities the union targeted was none other than New York City—a target that ultimately put Rockefeller moderates in direct conflict with Reagan. The UFW's boycott surged with success in New York City, cutting grape purchases by 98% and garnering the public support of Republican Mayor John Lindsay. The announcement of support, which promised to cut all city purchases of California grapes, originally came from Deputy Mayor Timothy W. Costello. In a June 6 press conference, Reagan attempted to downplay the announcement, stating that he spoke to Mayor Lindsey who "wasn't aware that his Deputy Mayor had made that statement." Yet, to the chagrin of Reagan, Lindsey never disavowed the

action, and in fact remained listed as a supporter of the UFW for at least the next four years. By July, the telegrams emanating from Reagan's office, which also served as press releases, contained a heightened tone of both disapproval and political pressure. "Governor Reagan has asked me to repeat what he told you on the telephone," Secretary William Clark wrote to Lindsey, "that he is hopeful that the action on the part of your deputy mayor will not result in retaliatory legislation on the part of the California State Legislature which is still in session." Clark sent a similar public telegram to Rockefeller, informing him "Governor Reagan…regrets such hasty action on the part of the City of New York without prior consultation," adding that "it seems to us highly unwise for government entities to become involved in this boycott action."

Rockefeller met Reagan's threats and criticism with the calculated strategy of silence. Like the Bracero Program controversy years earlier, Rockefeller continued to plod carefully between agriculture and labor, and with his eye on the 1968 election adroitly avoided direct involvement in the emerging UFW controversy. To be sure, the silence of the New York governor aimed at maintaining the middle ground, and thus the support of agribusiness in the Empire State. Yet, his silence also bespoke to the actions already taken by other moderates. In short, Rockefeller did not speak out because he did not need to. Lindsey's support of Chavez and the UFW through the city government of New York helped advance the union's cause exponentially—favorable action taken by at least sixteen other mayors around the country. Similarly, moderate Republican senators like Jacob Javits of New York and Thomas Kuchel of California advocated such support for farm-workers on the federal level, arguing for the recognition of the UFW and the extension of collective bargaining rights to agricultural labor. Rockefeller's silence, moreover, is further contextualized politically when juxtaposed against the heightened rhetoric of his two Republican rivals, Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon. Together

on the California leg of the Nixon '68 campaign, Nixon and Reagan publicly ate grapes at stops in San Francisco and California's Central Valley, characterizing the UFW's boycott as "illegal," "immoral," and nothing more than "attempted blackmail." NAR, by contrast, saved his criticisms for Richard Nixon when making his own campaign debut in San Francisco, lamenting—once again—the extreme right turn of the GOP in regard to both labor management and Vietnam. Indeed, the crumbling moderate business – labor coalition represented a primary concern of Rockefeller, as seen that year in the New York City garbage strike. Taking on his moderate colleague, Mayor John Lindsey, the governor refused proposals to call in the National Guard and successfully push forward negotiations between sanitation workers and the city, earning praise from the AFL-CIO while ultimately cowing Lindsey into admitting he was "mistaken."

In 1969, the chasm between Rockefeller's middle ground and the mounting Reaganism of the GOP widened further. California Senator George Murphy submitted federal legislation—trumpeted approvingly by Reagan—that would outlaw strikes and boycotts in agriculture, and as critics observed, undercut any hope of farm labor organization. The newly elected President Nixon contributed his own touch to this anti-labor trajectory, increasing U.S. grape shipments to Vietnam by 350%. And in California, the Reagan Administration spearheaded the anti-UFW boycott campaign funded by agribusiness through the State Department of Agriculture. On the other side of the rising anti-labor divide, Rockefeller celebrated the publication of the first annual report of the New York State Interdepartmental Committee on Migrant Labor. Initiated by the New York Governor in April 1968 to "improve the lot of migrant workers," the Committee represented Rockefeller's attempt to mediate and maintain a road of cooperation between agricultural producers and farm labor. "Agricultural employees have historically been exempted

from many of the protections provided industrial workers," Rockefeller wrote in the report's preface, "it is essential that we make every effort to now effectively reach the migrant." The following month, NAR also submitted his own Farm Labor Bill to the New York Legislature, which provided a progressive minimum wage, stronger enforcement of health and safety regulations in both migrant housing and work environment, as well as a system of unemployment insurance. While neither Rockefeller's Farm Labor Bill nor his Committee's report advocated collective bargaining for agricultural labor, the government documents—like the governor who signed them—surely embodied the moderate essence of the middle ground, embracing an inclusive view of labor management that could not have differed more from the conservative ethos of Reaganism. In the decade that followed, both this perspective and Rockefeller's middle ground that gave life to the moderate business-labor coalition, would lay extinct in the political landscape of the GOP.

Rockefeller once observed, "Politics is a kaleidoscope of constantly changing relationships." Indeed, few quotes ring more true in regard to the rise of Reaganism and the erosion of Rockefeller's moderate Republicanism during the sixties era. In 1970, NAR ran successfully for reelection in what perhaps was one of the last moderate campaigns of the Republican middle ground. In July of the same year, Cesar Chavez and the UFW celebrated unprecedented victory, garnering contracts that ultimately covered some 98% of California grape growers, and earning collective bargaining recognition for farm-workers. Amid the celebration, however, few noticed how the union's movement helped propel (and highlight) the wave of polarization within U.S. party politics, which forever changed those very political relationships — namely labor and business — Rockefeller discussed. Within a decade, the UFW's victory — like Rockefeller's middle ground — would prove to be both an aberration on, and casualty of,

the expanding landscape of Reaganism. Historians in recent years have sought to highlight Rockefeller's late adaptation to this political environment, noting his "right turn" during the 1970s as seen in the Attica Prison riots, drug legislation, and his law and order rhetoric. Yet like the emphasis on social politics in the conservative ascendance, this same focus regarding Rockefeller misses the crux of the middle ground—the business-labor coalition—and his unsuccessful fight to maintain this moderate balance in the face of Reaganism. Nothing proved more devastating to the politics of moderation within the GOP than this shift of political economy. Taken together with the heated social issues of race and New Left activism, we can see the full spectrum of party polarization, and through the political career of NAR, the ever-shrinking middle ground of American politics.

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