John D. Rockefeller IV (D)

Of Charleston — Elected 1984, 3rd term

Biographical Information

Born: June 18, 1937, New York, N.Y.

Education: International Christian U. (Tokyo, Japan), 1957-60; Harvard U., A.B. 1961.

Occupation: Public official.

Family: Wife, Sharon Percy; four children.

Religion: Presbyterian.

Political Career: W.Va. House, 1967-69; W.Va. secretary of state, 1969-73; Democratic nominee for governor, 1972; governor, 1977-85.

Capitol Office: 531 Hart Bldg. 20510; 224-6472.

Committees

Commerce, Science & Transportation
Aviation; Communications; Manufacturing & Competitiveness; Science, Technology & Space (ranking)

Finance
Health Care (ranking); International Trade; Social Security & Family Policy

Veterans' Affairs



In Washington: Just re-elected to a third term, Rockefeller has adopted two seemingly contradictory political personas during his 12-year Senate tenure: consummate compromiser and party loyalist. He played both roles in the 104th Congress.

Rockefeller's top priority at the start of 1995 was one that had been a pet issue for years: product liability. It also ranked high on the agenda of the new GOP majority. House Republicans had made overhaul of the nation's product liability laws a promise in their "Contract With America" campaign platform.

So with Republicans putting their shoulder to the issue, Rockefeller had cause to hope for a conclusion to a debate that had been on the congressional agenda since 1981. He joined forces with Sen. Slade Gorton, R-Wash., and became a broker between the White House and Congress.

But if the product liability issue brought out Rockefeller's instincts to compromise, his partisan fires were stoked by other elements of the GOP agenda. He accused Republicans of "pure, classic meanness" after they rejected welfare language designed to extend benefits for children beyond the limit on aid to their parents. And when the debate shifted to balancing the budget, Rockefeller routinely berated Republicans for their positions on health care entitlements. "The Republican budget is designed to raid, not save, the Medicare program," he said on the Senate floor in July 1995. "Medicare's money is going to be used to finance tax cuts for the wealthy. It is that simple."

Rockefeller's dual reputation for loyalty and pragmatism — not to mention his recognition as heir to America's most legendary fortune and a scion of one of its best-known political families — has made him the subject of presidential speculation. Talk of his White House aspirations dates as far back as 1968, when he was nominated to be West Virginia's secretary of state. It was revived during his two terms as governor and became serious in 1990, after he had established himself as a presence in the Senate.

Rockefeller tested the waters by forming an exploratory committee for the 1992 campaign but ultimately declined to seek that nomination, choosing to wait until he was better prepared. That mirrored his career in the Senate, where he spent most of his first term tending the back benches, studying the issues and minding the chamber's folkways.

Indeed, "Jay" Rockefeller is an old hand at winning over those who think a man born into wealth and power must be spoiled and aloof. More than thirty years ago, he impressed the people of Emmons, W.Va., as a sincere, idealistic VISTA volunteer. In his first years in the Senate, he was often found writing in the chamber, his 6-foot-6-inch frame folded into one of the spartan desks. His behavior is the perfect antidote to the expectation of arrogance.

The 103rd Congress should have been his coronation as a true Senate power. Not only did he chair a key Finance health subcommittee, he also became chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. As chairman of the panel, Rockefeller managed to clear a number of bills, including one authorizing the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay benefits to veterans disabled by so-called Persian Gulf syndrome.

That issue remained a hot topic early in the 105th Congress, with Rockefeller and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, R-Pa., calling for more time for affected veterans to file disability claims for undiagnosed illnesses.

But in the 103rd, Rockefeller gambled everything on health care, particularly the concept that every American should be guaranteed coverage — and he lost big. "Maybe it was too much to expect that in two years you could have changed so much of the health care system," he said after the effort was officially laid to rest in September 1994. "But we didn't know that when we started, and there wasn't any reason for us to know that."

The gamble on health care cost Rockefeller and the Democratic Party as a whole. Republicans helped generate a negative public response

to President Clinton's health care plan, and that played a part in the GOP toppling congressional Democrats from power in 1994. Rockefeller found himself in the minority in the 104th Congress.

Although many Democrats struggled to regain their political footing after that historic defeat, Rockefeller was quick to thrust himself into the center of the action again, making product liability his focus. True to his reputation for diligently seeking the middle ground, he cosponsored a proposal that excluded the most controversial ideas, including medical malpractice language and a "loser pays" provision that would have exposed civil litigants to the potential burden of paying the other sides attorneys' fees.

Mindful of previous floor battles that sunk product liability bills, Rockefeller resisted efforts to amend the measure and questioned then-Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole's decision to broaden the scope. Rockefeller was vindicated when the Senate considered Dole's version. His contention that only a narrow bill could muster the votes necessary to invoke cloture and prevent a filibuster proved accurate, and Dole, after losing three cloture votes, agreed to push a revised Gorton-Rockefeller bill. The Senate passed it on a 61-39 vote.

The legislation languished in conference, however, and became mired in presidential politics by the time House and Senate negotiators reached agreement. Rockefeller openly courted the White House on the issue and predicted that the president would sign the product liability measure. But Clinton eventually vetoed it.

The veto frustrated Rockefeller, and he expressed his disappointment publicly. Still, the experience did not sour his relationship with Clinton. He defended the president and his staff when the White House came under fire in 1996 for gathering confidential FBI background files on hundreds of Republicans, accusing the GOP of engaging in "cutthroat" politics. "The meanest politics I have heard in 12 years I have been up here, frankly, have come from the other side," he said when the issue spilled onto the Senate floor.

Also during the 104th, Rockefeller played an active role in the debate over changes to the Medicare and Medicaid programs. From his seat on the Finance Committee, he offered amendments designed to soften the impact of GOP proposals to restrain the growth of spending on the programs. When Republicans proved not to be in a compromising mood, Rockefeller responded with sharp, partisan rhetoric. "This savaging of the Medicaid program is the single most callous proposal before this committee," he said.

Rockefeller generally was expected to address international issues, his one-time academic specialty, in the Senate, but initially he focused on West Virginia concerns — the cost of shipping coal by rail, the job prospects of miners, steelmakers and other workers in Rust Belt industries. Although parochial interests no longer monopolize his agenda, Rockefeller has not forgotten home-state voters since his ascension onto the national scene with the health care and product liability issues.

He scored a victory in the 104th Congress by attaching language to the new telecommunications law requiring that schools, libraries and hospitals in rural areas receive preferential rates for their telecommunications services. The language was a point of contention early in negotiations on the bill, but Rockefeller and Olympia J. Snowe, R-Maine, mustered the support to keep it in the final version.

Rockefeller also inserted language into a trade technical corrections law that corrects "inverted tariff" situations in which the duty on a finished product is lower than the duty on the materials used to manufacture it. Such situations have the effect of reducing jobs at U.S. plants that finish goods. Rockefeller secured protection for: 500 jobs at a Philips Lighting plant in Fairmont, W.Va.; Corning Inc., which has operations in West Virginia; and aircraft manufacturers such as Pratt & Whitney, which has a plant near Clarksburg.

At Home: Rockefeller's decision in 1996 to endorse controversial gubernatorial candidate Charlotte Pritt raised some eyebrows in state Democratic circles. Pritt, a party maverick, in 1992 had challenged the sitting Democratic governor, Gaston Caperton. Caperton and other leading Democrats refused to back Pritt in her 1996 campaign against former GOP Gov. Cecil Underwood.

But Rockefeller campaigned for her in the waning days of her race against Underwood (whom Rockefeller had defeated in the 1976 governor's contest). Pritt lost, but there were no repercussions for Rockefeller at the polls. He won re-election to a third term with 77 percent of the vote over a neophyte challenger, Betty A. Burks.

Given his background, Rockefeller seems an odd leader for one of the poorest states. But in a state where money often talks and Democrats nearly always win, he has been a successful politician. He is well-known — newspapers need only refer to him as Jay in the headlines — though his wealth and celebrity engender no small amount of resentment in a state beset with one of the nation's lowest per capita personal income. Past polls have shown him with negative ratings as high as 40 percent. But Rockefeller has won many friends by patiently working his way up the political ladder, serving in low-visibility offices before twice winning the governorship and capturing the Senate seat of retiring Democrat Jennings Randolph in 1984.

Rockefeller moved to West Virginia in 1964 as a VISTA volunteer in the Action for Appalachia Youth program, then decided to stay and enter politics, starting near the bottom; he ran for a seat in the state House in 1966. After winning that, he captured the office of secretary of state in 1968.

His political ascent was interrupted in 1972 when he lost the governor's race to Republican Arch A. Moore Jr. Rockefeller was hurt by carpetbagger charges and an environmental platform that opposed strip mining. After the election, he

recanted some of his environmental positions and strengthened his ties to the state by serving as president of West Virginia Wesleyan College. Running for governor again in 1976, he trounced former Gov. Underwood (1957-61). (Moore was ineligible to seek re-election.) Rockefeller left nothing to chance in 1980, winning re-election after a campaign that bombarded households with direct-mail appeals and TV ads, even on Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., stations.

When it was reported he was spending almost $12 million against Moore, who was seeking a comeback, bumper stickers appeared with the slogan, "Make Him Spend It All, Arch." But Moore was unable either to drive Rockefeller broke or out of office. Rockefeller won by nine points.

Rockefeller's second term was stymied by the state's economic woes. Heavily dependent on the battered coal industry, West Virginia was staggered by unemployment and sinking revenues. He was the target of criticism when taxes were raised, salaries frozen and state spending cut.

With West Virginia's governors restricted to two consecutive terms, it was long apparent that Rockefeller would run for the Senate in 1984. Democratic Sen. Jennings Randolph announced his retirement plans in early 1983. About a year later, Moore, his strongest potential GOP rival, decided to pass this time, and joined the governor's race.

But Rockefeller was not home free. He was near the nadir of his popularity when he entered the Senate race. Republicans nominated a wealthy, young political neophyte, John Raese, who promised to match Rockefeller's spending dollar for dollar. But with Rockefeller mounting another $12 million campaign, that was a pipe dream. Raese's campaign was further stalled by a series of gaffes.

But Rockefeller made Raese the target of his late media barrage — a tactic widely considered to be a mistake — and the attacks gave Raese publicity he could not afford himself. Aided by Reagan's surge atop the ticket, Raese pulled nearly even with Rockefeller in polls. But Rockefeller survived, with large majorities in the industrial northern Panhandle and in the southern coal fields.

In his 1990 re-election, Rockefeller spent more than $300,000 in a primary against two challengers who spent less than $1,000 between them, and he refused to agree to a $2 million spending limit for the general election. Burned by past charges of attempting to buy public office with his personal fortune, Rockefeller shied away from using his own funds, and instead amassed a campaign treasury from PACs.

Republicans nominated John Yoder, a lawyer from Harpers Ferry. Yoder threw Rockefeller off balance briefly by charging that he was "bought" by special interests. But a lack of funds crippled Yoder's campaign. The Rockefeller effort kicked into full gear just as Yoder was being deserted by his national party; Rockefeller won all but three counties.

SENATE ELECTIONS

1996 General		
John D. Rockefeller IV (D)	456,526	(77%)
Betty A. Burks (R)	139,088	(23%)
1996 Primary		
Jay Rockefeller (D)	280,303	(88%)
Bruce Barilla (D)	36,637	(12%)

Previous Winning Percentages: **1990** (68%) **1984** (52%)

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

	Receipts	Receipts from PACs		Expenditures
1996				
Rockefeller (D)	$3,004,275	$987,319	(33%)	$2,538,473

KEY VOTES

1997	
Approve balanced-budget constitutional amendment	N
Approve chemical weapons treaty	Y
1996	
Approve farm bill	N
Limit punitive damages in product liability cases	Y
Exempt small businesses from higher minimum wage	N
Approve welfare overhaul	Y
Bar job discrimination based on sexual orientation	Y
Override veto of ban on "partial birth" abortions	N
1995	
Approve GOP budget with tax and spending cuts	N
Approve constitutional amendment barring flag desecration	Y

VOTING STUDIES

	Presidential Support		Party Unity		Conservative Coalition	
Year	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**
1996	90	7	90	6	29	68
1995	85	12	86	12	32	65
1994	92	3	86	9	34	66
1993	91	4	91	6	37	54
1992	28	72	88	10	26	68
1991	36	64	91	8	28	73

INTEREST GROUP RATINGS

Year	ADA	AFL-CIO	CCUS	ACU
1996	85	n/a	46	16
1995	90	100	42	9
1994	95	75	22	0
1993	70	91	18	12
1992	100	91	20	7
1991	90	75	10	5