

National Congressional Club ^[1]

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by Ronnie W. Faulkner, 2006

The National Congressional Club (NCC), originally the Congressional Club of North Carolina and later renamed the Conservative Club, was a political action committee formed by Tom Ellis in 1973 to help retire the campaign debts of U.S. senator Jesse Helms. The club rapidly became a formidable fund-raising and media organization closely identified with Helms and his conservative ^[2] agenda. It also was noteworthy for what critics called "attack ads"-television ads that emphasized presumably negative aspects of an opponent's record.



Tom Ellis (left) and Carter Wren (right) at the National Congressional Club office, November 12, 1979. Copyright News & Observer, all rights reserved. Used with permission. Housed at the N.C. State Archives, call no. NO_18426Fr25. ^[3]

Under Ellis's leadership and with Carter Wrenn as executive director, the NCC successfully managed a number of campaigns for the U.S. Senate, including Helms's runs in 1978, 1984, and 1990, as well as John East ^[4]'s campaign in 1980 and Lauch Faircloth ^[5]'s in 1992. It is also credited with Ronald Reagan ^[6]'s victory in the 1976 North Carolina GOP primary against incumbent President Gerald Ford ^[7] and raised an estimated \$10 million during Reagan's successful 1980 campaign for the presidency.

In the mid-1980s Fairness in Media, a committee of NCC members and allies of Helms, initiated a very public fight to take over the Columbia Broadcasting System in order to promote their political goals. The takeover bid failed but gained a great deal of publicity for Helms and the Congressional Club. In 1993 the NCC supported the first successful twentieth century Republican candidate for mayor of Raleigh, Tom Fetzer, a former staffer for the organization. It was not as successful in other races, notably those for Congress and the governorship.

The NCC had a falling out with Helms in 1993 and had to lay off some staff members and relocate its offices from Raleigh to Franklin County ^[8]. In 1996, calling itself the Conservative Club, it was revitalized and gave a brief boost to the presidential aspirations of millionaire businessman Steve Forbes, a proponent of the flat tax. Forbes won a few early GOP primaries and did some early damage to front-runner Bob Dole ^[9] of Kansas, but the legendary attack ads of the Congressional Club did not have national staying power, and even Forbes started to take a more positive tone before his campaign collapsed.

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