

A Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy?

The machinations of a powerful syndicate behind the success of school choice makes for a juicy story. Too bad it isn't true.

The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers
by Josh Cowen

Harvard Education Press, 2024, \$34; 224 pages.

As reviewed by Jay P. Greene

JOSH COWEN'S NEW BOOK, *The Privateers*, declares that "there is a vast right-wing conspiracy" that explains how "voucher advocates have managed to spread privatization plans in states across the country despite a growing number of data-backed arguments against those schemes." Cowen also provides a brief and incomplete description of those "data-backed arguments" that fails to bolster his claim that a conspiracy is responsible for foisting choice policies on unsuspecting Americans.

According to Cowen, at the center of this conspiracy is an organization known as the Council for National Policy, which he describes as "a secretive national policy advocacy network . . . that bands many of the ancillary actors in these pages together." The Council for National Policy or its acronym, CNP, appears in this slim volume 93 times.

The CNP's "vast, aligned network of libertarians and religious nationalists" includes "the DeVos family and groups affiliated with Charles and David Koch," as well as those associated with the Heritage and Bradley Foundations, who meet "three times a year in 'opulent' hotel surroundings."

I am also a key player in this conspiracy; my name appears 70 times in Cowen's book. But I have to confess I'd never heard of the Council for National Policy before. You'd think I would know the name of the organization writing me those fat checks and delivering marching orders to my inbox daily, but it must be so secretive that it is even a secret to me. The nature of conspiracy theories is that the absence of evidence can be taken as confirmation as much as the existence of evidence.

Of course, if the CNP really were orchestrating a voucher conspiracy in which I was a central figure, you would expect me to deny any knowledge of it. So, how can readers know whether to believe Cowen's conspiracy claims? They might hope he would offer accounts of how school choice has been raised at CNP gatherings and share details about school choice strategy gathered from CNP planning documents. Unfortunately, there

are no examples of anything like this in the book. Cowen never documents a single instance of the CNP directing the conspiracy he alleges it coordinates.

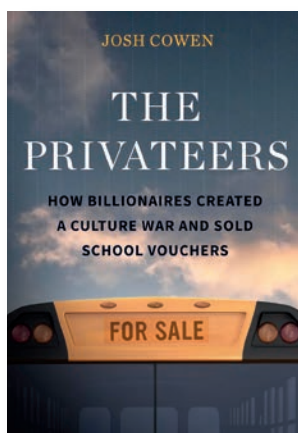
Instead, Cowen simply documents that some organizations have participated in the CNP over its four decades of existence and that those organizations or other organizations and individuals somehow connected to them have done work related to school choice. For example, he notes that leaders of both the Heritage Foundation and the Bradley Foundation have been CNP members and that those foundations have also provided support for the organization Moms for Liberty. School choice advocate Corey DeAngelis has appeared "at events organized by Moms for Liberty," which Cowen accuses of targeting LGBTQ+ people. Parents Defending Education was a "bronze"-level sponsor of a Moms for Liberty conference and was founded by Nicole Neilly, who previously worked at the Independent Women's Forum and the Cato Institute, which

Cowen says are related to the Koch brothers.

Given these various connections, Cowen concludes that the CNP is coordinating a conspiracy to advance school choice and to attack LGBTQ+ people—a conspiracy involving the libertarian-leaning Kochs, the "religious nationalist" DeVos family, and the Heritage and Bradley Foundations. And people like Corey DeAngelis, Nicole Neilly, and me are pawns in this conspiracy being directed by the CNP.

Political efforts typically involve coalitions of groups who agree on some matters while disagreeing on others. The fact that people openly coordinate their advocacy on shared interests does not make those efforts illegitimate. And their joint effort on shared interests does not mean they are working in unison on a broad set of issues, from election denial to reproductive rights to school choice. The only threads tightly connecting all of these issues are Cowen's passionate feelings about them and his conviction that anyone who disagrees with him must be part of a dastardly conspiracy rather than a fellow citizen with a different perspective.

If you find Cowen's six-degrees-of-separation kind of "evidence" persuasive, you might similarly be convinced of David Duke's claim that Jews are a



Josh Cowen

“powerful tribal group that dominates our media and dominates our international banking.” Duke could point to the fact that the leaders of a number of financial firms and media companies are Jewish. Some of them may even know each other, attend some of the same synagogues, or have crossed paths at summer camp.

When Duke makes his arguments, most respectable people immediately recognize them as the ravings of a crazy conspiracy theorist. But when Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State, makes the same kinds of arguments in a book published by Harvard Education Press, people may fail to detect how weak his evidence of “a vast right-wing conspiracy” really is.

Thin Evidence

Cowen is not trained as a historian or an investigative journalist and appears to have done no original research to uncover the conspiracy he alleges. Instead, he relies on journalist Anne Nelson, whom he references 39 times, and historian Nancy MacLean, whom he cites 19 times, to document the existence of shadowy networks secretly controlling events. Cowen never questions the veracity of these two sources, nor does he contribute any independent evidence to support their claims. Cowen’s only contribution to the argument is to summarize the general libertarian and “religious nationalist” conspiracies Nelson and MacLean allege, and then to infer—without additional evidence—that they also apply to the specific issue of school choice.

Cowen’s suggestion that this vast right-wing conspiracy is responsible for the growing adoption of school choice policies despite the “catastrophic evidence on voucher programs” reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of democratic processes and a shocking lack of respect for democratically decided outcomes. Most political science students who make it past the introductory courses understand that elected officials are attentive to the organized interests of their constituents and typically pursue policies that advance those interests. Money matters in politics because it makes it easier to organize and communicate people’s interests, but policy outcomes are almost never “bought” in democratic governments. People tend to know their own interests, and money cannot convince them to embrace policies that are contrary to those interests.

If Cowen were to critically examine his own argument, he

might consider alternatives to his contention that school choice has only spread across the country because billionaires used their wealth to weave a vast conspiracy that has hoodwinked people into ignoring the “overwhelming” evidence against

vouchers. He might consider the possibility that other people interpret the evidence differently and also assign different importance to various kinds of outcomes.

For example, the evaluation of the Milwaukee school choice program for which Cowen was a junior researcher found that students in the program scored

significantly higher than a set of matched students in Milwaukee public schools in the study’s final year. In that year, the tests became more consequential for the participating private schools because low scores might prevent the schools from receiving students in the future. Cowen is convinced that the positive result for choice students was an artifact of an accountability effect and not the result of the school choice intervention—but

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A conspiracy that never was: school choice advocates hatching a secret plan to help families.

some of his co-authors believe that the elevated stakes finally motivated students to exert effort on the test to show their higher level of achievement. In keeping with his conspiratorial inclination, Cowen sees malicious deceit where others might see good-faith disagreements.

Similarly, Cowen dismisses the importance of studies finding positive effects from school choice programs on non-test-score outcomes, such as educational attainment, racial integration, single parenthood, and criminal records, as cynical efforts “to buffer headlines on the enormous loss to student achievement.”

According to Cowen, the test scores of students enrolled in choice programs are the sole criteria for “evidence-based” policymaking, while other outcomes are merely a diversionary tactic concocted by the conspiracy. Even among studies that examine test-score outcomes, some consider the results for participating students, while others consider the results for the broader system of students whose public schools face increased competition. Cowen’s claim that school choice has been more disastrous than the effects of a hurricane or a pandemic is based on his interpretation of more-recent participant-effect studies to the exclusion of research on competitive effects and non-test-score outcomes.

Rather than being hoodwinked by a conspiracy, perhaps policymakers are paying more attention to competitive effects or non-test-score outcomes. Perhaps policymakers are less persuaded by social science in general and are giving less weight to the evidence invoked by Cowen than to the experiences described by their constituents. Only those fundamentally hostile to democracy believe that the only legitimate policy decisions are those in line with their own reading of the evidence. Whenever elected officials choose to do something else, these petty tyrants believe it must be because policymaking has been corrupted by evil forces.

Dramatic Turnaround

If Cowen was determined to write a conspiracy book, the least he could have done was to make it an exciting page-turner, like Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* or Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. I regret to report that *The Privateers* is written more like a Kamala Harris speech:

Education is personal. In both the social and the neurological senses of the word *learning* we are adaptive creatures, processing and attempting to make sense of the world around us before we are conscious. Education is also about memory: the way we build identity and outlook based on the information our minds collect and retain, often whether we know we have done so or not. And our memories are evocative: we experience emotion when we recall our own histories as we position ourselves within the events of our lives around us.

I think this excerpt was meant to sound menacing, but the demand for a “reckoning” just made me laugh out loud:

I structure the final chapter as an epilogue, glancing backward but mostly looking forward, weighing warnings about discrimination, exclusion, and human rights alongside very practical threats to democracy on issues like voting and the peaceful transition of electoral power. One need not be fluent in every democratic theory of education, I argue, to look aghast at the role of Bradley Foundation officers in Donald Trump’s election-denial activities, of Council for National Policy members in

voter suppression tactics, and ongoing efforts to degrade the freedom of some Americans—and their children—in the name of religious values and free exercise. There must, I insist, be a reckoning.

The conspiracy theory promoted by this book is so unhinged, the evidence for it so lacking, and the writing so poor, that it suggests an alternative conspiracy theory. What if Josh Cowen is actually trying to assist the CNP conspiracy by making such a weak effort to discredit it? This alternative theory is no less credible than the one the book purports to advance.

By Cowen’s own account, he has been a significant beneficiary of CNP-affiliated organizations, has played a central role in producing much of the positive evidence about school

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choice, and has been closely connected to almost all of the key players in the so-called CNP conspiracy. As a master’s student at Georgetown University, Cowen worked as a research assistant for Patrick Wolf on the D.C., New York, and Dayton voucher experiments that yielded positive results and was published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

When Cowen was a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin, I provided him with the data from my own evaluation of the Charlotte voucher experiment for him to replicate. He confirmed my positive results, reporting in his very first peer-reviewed publication that “in this estimation, voucher impacts in Charlotte are positive, but appear to be moderated by the probability of compliance.” These results and my role in helping him produce them are somehow absent from the book.

Cowen then joined the Milwaukee school choice evaluation described above and was the first author on a *Policy Studies Journal* article that found: “We show that exposure to voucher schools was related to graduation and, in particular, to enrollment and persistence in a 4-year college. . . . We conclude by stressing . . . the importance of attainment outcomes in educational research.” These findings are also omitted from his book.

During the time Cowen was working on the Milwaukee evaluation, he and his family wanted to spend the summer in Fayetteville, Arkansas, to be close to relatives. I arranged for him to have office space in our department to facilitate this. This personal connection is also missing from the book. Several years later, in 2015, I asked Cowen to be the external reviewer for the reaccreditation of our department. His positive report helped renew our doctoral program for another seven-year term.

Cowen also reports directly receiving money from the

Walton Family Foundation and the Arnold Foundation as well as indirectly benefiting from support from the Bradley Foundation. And in 2018, Cowen was part of a team that received a five-year \$10 million grant from Betsy DeVos's Department of Education to study school choice, with about \$2 million of that money going to EPIC, a research center that Cowen codirected at Michigan State University. For reasons that have never been explained, Cowen was removed as the codirector of EPIC in 2020, less than halfway through that multi-million-dollar grant period.

Cowen also describes his six-time attendance at an "exclusive," "all-expense-paid" gathering of 70 members of the education "establishment" organized by Rick Hess at the American Enterprise Institute, citing an invitation he received as recently as January 2020. While this private gathering included a diverse set of people, including teachers union officials, education reporters, foundation staff, and policy researchers, Cowen denounces it as a clever tool of the conspiracy to make everyone there "complicit" in its wrong-doing: "It is through gatherings like these that a policy proposal such as school vouchers . . . can persist through a decade of some of the worst evidence to accumulate against any education policy plan in the public record."

If being closely associated with and even financially benefiting

from those connected to the CNP, like the DeVos family and the Bradley Foundation, is evidence of being part of the CNP conspiracy, then Cowen would appear to be a co-conspirator through at least 2018. If attending a private gathering at AEI makes him "complicit," then he remained involved through at least 2020. If reporting positive results from school choice studies is further proof of participating in a CNP conspiracy to hoodwink policymakers, Cowen would also appear to be a co-conspirator for more than half of his professional career.

Only since around 2020 has Cowen adopted a dramatically different interpretation of the evidence and embraced a conspiratorial tone in his disagreements. Who knows what accounts for this relatively recent reinvention, but it is no crazier than the rest of his book to consider that perhaps it is all part of an incredibly sophisticated scheme to discredit CNP critics by posing as an inept critic himself. Readers may never fully grasp the 3-D chess of the CNP conspiracy, but if you see Cowen and me lighting cigars while toasting each other with single-cask bourbon at our next gathering at a secret country mansion in Colorado known as "The Meadows," you may finally glimpse the truth.

Jay P. Greene is senior research fellow in the Center for Education Politics at the Heritage Foundation.

SCALIA'S CONSTITUTION

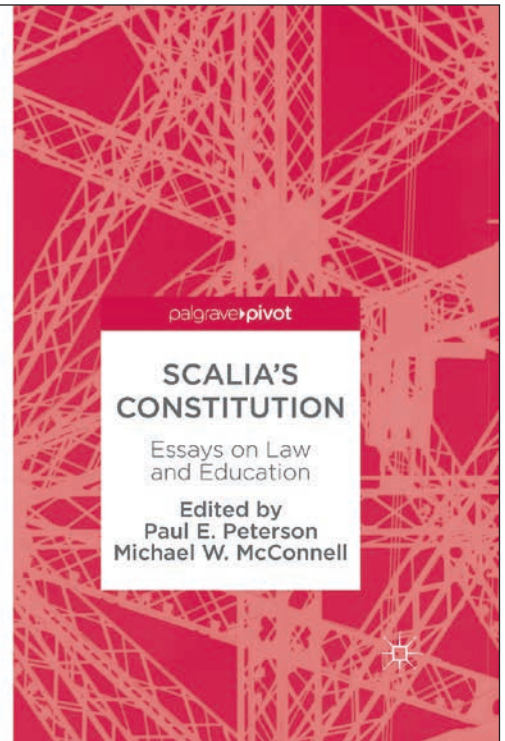
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