

The GOP book-buying machine boosts Republicans on the bestseller list

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By Paul Farhi

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The National Republican Congressional Committee, which works to elect GOP candidates to Congress, spent nearly \$400,000 on bulk purchases of the book. The organization acquired 25,500 copies through two online booksellers, enough to fuel “Fortitude’s” ascent up the bestseller lists. The NRCC said it gave away copies as incentives to donors, raising \$1.5 million in the process. 

The NRCC wasn’t the only outfit providing a big-bucks boost to conservative authors. Four party-affiliated organizations, including the Republican National Committee, collectively spent more than \$1 million during the past election cycle mass-purchasing books written by GOP candidates, elected officials and personalities, according to Federal Election Commission expenditure reports. The purchases helped turn several volumes into bestsellers.

While there’s no prohibition on such second-party purchases, a new complaint alleges that another Texas Republican, Sen. Ted Cruz, crossed the line into illegal activity when he used campaign money to boost sales of his newest book.

A government watchdog organization, the Campaign Legal Center, filed complaints last week with the Federal Election Commission and the Senate Ethics Committee about the manner in which Cruz’s campaign aides went about bulk buying and promoting the senator’s latest volume, “One Vote Away: How a Single Supreme Court Vote Can Change History,” published last fall.

The group said Cruz’s campaign committee effectively converted campaign contributions to Cruz’s personal enrichment, an illegal practice. It alleged Cruz’s staff did so by spending \$154,000 of his supporters’ funds on copies of his book, and an additional \$18,000 to promote it via Facebook ads reading “Buy my new book!” and “Order it here” over photos of Cruz. Both actions increased sales of “One Vote Away,” which in turn allegedly triggered illegal royalty payments to Cruz, the group said.

“When elected officials use campaign contributions to advance their personal bottom lines, they compromise the integrity of the political process and undermine the public’s trust that their political contributions are being used legally,” the Campaign Legal Center wrote in a letter to the Senate Ethics Committee. The group is seeking unspecified civil penalties against Cruz. The FEC typically requires candidates to repay any questionable expenses to their campaigns.

Other book purchases by party organizations don't raise the same self-enrichment issues as those in the Cruz complaint, which hinges on his use of his own campaign funds. But the effect can be the same: A big buy can launch a book to prominence, unleashing a stream of royalties for its author and potentially driving up cash advances for their next book.

And that can be a significant source of income for lawmakers. Brett Kappel, an attorney who specializes in federal election regulations, said members of Congress are forbidden from earning more than \$29,595 in income beyond their federal salaries in 2021. But book advances and royalties are specifically exempted from these limits.

"You can see why writing books is one of the favorite ways for members to earn outside income," Kappel said.

In addition to Crenshaw's book, Republican organizations have made large bulk purchases of books by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) and Donald Trump Jr.

The Senate Conservatives Fund, a political action committee founded by former senator Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), committed nearly \$90,000 to bulk purchases of Cotton's book, "Sacred Duty: A Soldier's Tour of Arlington National Cemetery," which became a bestseller.

In February, the organization paid nearly \$65,000 to Regnery Publishing, Cruz's publisher, for advance copies of Hawley's forthcoming book. Hawley's book was supposed to have been published by Simon & Schuster, but the contract was canceled in January after Hawley came in for widespread criticism for challenging Joe Biden's electoral victory, leading up to the mob attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The first Trump Jr. book topped the New York Times bestseller list; the second rose and then quickly fell on Amazon's chart.

This appears to be a largely Republican phenomenon. While at least seven Democratic senators published books during the past election cycle, neither the Democratic National Committee nor the party's two congressional arms reported buying any of them in bulk quantities.

Given the potential to drive unrestricted amounts of income to elected officials, bulk purchasing has disturbed some government watchdogs.

"There's a difference between what's ethical and what's technically legal," said Jordan Libowitz, a spokesman for Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a federal watchdog organization. "A political party or outside group can help a candidate's bottom line and turn them into a best-selling author, something that could further help their bank account. That's not the purpose of a political party."

Republican organizations that have engaged in bulk purchases either did not respond to requests for comment or offered no comment. A spokesman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee said its book purchases — about \$77,000 in total last summer — were made by staff members who are no longer with the organization; it offered no further comment.

Cruz’s Senate office also declined to comment directly or respond to questions. Instead, it passed along a statement from Chris Gober, an attorney for Cruz’s Senate campaign, who said the campaign “has closely followed” federal laws and guidelines and “has not received any royalties whatsoever” from sales generated by his campaign’s purchases and ads.

The statement, however, doesn’t address royalties that could be paid to Cruz in the future. On top of a \$400,000 advance payment, his contract with Regnery Publishing calls for him to receive royalties of 15 percent on hardcover sales, as well as a lesser amount on paperback and electronic copies. The law forbids members of Congress from receiving royalties on books purchased with donated funds.

Nor did Cruz’s lawyer address the unusual manner in which the senator’s aides bought his book.

In a series of rulings since 2014, the FEC has advised campaigns to make bulk book buys only through the author’s publisher. This is designed to enable publishers to withhold royalty payments from the author for those purchases, as required by law. Cruz’s campaign followed the FEC guidance in 2015, when it spent nearly \$300,000 in campaign funds to buy copies of his previous book directly from the publisher, HarperCollins.

But when it came time to buy thousands of copies of “One Vote Away” last year, the campaign bypassed Cruz’s publisher and went through online retailers Books-a-Million and Barnes & Noble.

Online sellers don’t typically inform publishers when a purchase is made with donated funds, meaning the royalties may not be withheld from the author, as required by law. Buying retail also tends to be more expensive than going through the publisher, raising the possibility that any improper royalties Cruz does receive could be inflated along with the book price.

Other Republican groups have also turned to online sellers for their bulk book purchases.

The NRCC spent \$240,800 to buy Crenshaw’s book from Politics and Prose, the Washington, D.C., book store, instead of Crenshaw’s publisher, Hachette. The organization declined to explain why it bought books this way. Crenshaw’s office has previously declined to say if Crenshaw received royalties from the sales, and did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

Independent retailers such as Porchlight Book Co. of Milwaukee also got big bulk orders from Republican organizations. Donald Trump’s 2020 presidential campaign made more than \$106,000 in book purchases from Books and Greetings, a small store between a sushi restaurant and an Applebee’s in a strip mall in Northvale, N.J. (The campaign didn’t disclose which books it bought).

Bradley Graham, the co-owner of Politics and Prose (and a former Washington Post reporter), said there was “nothing unusual” about buying books this way, “especially if a customer can get a good discount, which often is the case with large purchases. Publishers frequently try to steer sales to bookstores to help us.”

Correction: *An earlier version of this online article incorrectly stated that Jim DeMint still heads the Senate Conservatives Fund. It has been corrected.*