

# Studying the Power Elite

Fifty Years of *Who Rules America?*

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# Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x

## SECTION ONE

### **Setting the Stage, Providing Context** **1**

Introduction: Situating <i>Who Rules America?</i> Within Debates on Power <i>G. William Domhoff</i>	3
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1 <i>Who Rules America?</i> Through Seven Editions and Fifty Years: Still More Accurate Than Alternative Power Theories <i>G. William Domhoff</i>	11
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## SECTION TWO

### **Larger Perspectives and Research Agendas** **61**

2 Domhoff, Mills, and Slow Power <i>Robert J.S. Ross</i>	63
3 The Life and Times of <i>Who Rules America?</i> and the Future of Power Structure Research <i>Richard W. Lachmann and Michael Schwartz</i>	70
4 Institutions, Policy-Planning Networks, and <i>Who Rules America?</i> <i>John L. Campbell</i>	86

**SECTION THREE**

**The Policy-Planning Network in Action** **103**

- 5 The Policy-Planning Network, Class Dominance, and the  
Challenge to Political Science 105  
*Joseph G. Peschek*

- 6 *Who Rules America?* And the Policy-Formation Network:  
The Case of Venture Philanthropy 116  
*Beth Mintz*

- 7 Corporate Interests and U.S. Foreign Policy 126  
*Ronald W. Cox*

**SECTION FOUR**

**The Power Elite and Their Opponents** **143**

- 8 Who Challenges the Power Elite? Labor Factions in  
20th-Century America 145  
*Daniel J. Schneider and Judith Stepan-Norris*

- 9 Who Rules the Roost? 165  
*Kathleen C. Schwartzman*

- 10 "Fairness" in Presidential Economic Policy: Disagreements  
Among Upper-Class Elites 182  
*Clarence Y.H. Lo*

- Index* 205

# Who Rules America? And **6** the Policy-Formation Network: The Case of Venture Philanthropy

*Beth Mintz*

Dateline: Washington, D.C., August 2008. Recently appointed superintendent of schools, Michele Rhee, has proposed a \$200 million restructuring plan for the District of Columbia emphasizing school choice, the privatization of public education, and merit pay in lieu of tenure, with corporate philanthropy funding it all (Scott 2009). In a stunning example of a new, entrepreneurial form of private financial support, “venture philanthropy” is quickly reshaping the landscape of K-12 in the United States. Indeed, some suggest that organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates and the Walton Family foundations set urban policy with no public accountability (Lipman and Jenkins 2011), an insight quite familiar to readers of G. William Domhoff’s work.

In recent years, foundations have become major vehicles for advocacy funding but, in 1967, few appreciated their political potential when *Who Rules America?* (WRA?) drew attention to their role in shaping cultural and intellectual projects. More broadly, WRA? provided a framework for thinking about the policy formation process itself, and for this—and many other reasons—it is difficult to underestimate the importance of this work. Indeed, WRA? inspired a generation of researchers, laying the foundation for a voluminous literature that includes investigations of the social origins of government officials; the roots of historically important legislation, including the Social

Security Act of 1935; the role of Political Action Committees in elections; the social networks of lobbyists; corporate interlocking directorates; and potential mechanisms of unity within the business community.

Surely, the unifying question here is about the exercise of power and it is within this context that Domhoff draws the reader to consider the policy formation process: who really creates public policy and how is it implemented. Concentrating on the social upper class, his early work suggests that social cohesion facilitates policy cohesion and, over the years, he presented an overwhelming amount of data demonstrating that those who “rule” are indeed socially interrelated. And with this, he underscores a fundamental assumption about elite power wielding that is, for a dominant class to rule, it must have at least some capacity for unity.

The publication of the third edition of *WRA?* brought a refined understanding of the policy formation process as it begins in corporate boardrooms, social clubs, and discussion groups, and ends in government-enacted legislation with the help of a network of foundations, think tanks, and policy groups. (Domhoff 1998). These two decades later, however, the world appears quite different. Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, and George Soros have replaced the Rockefellers, Mellons, and Harrimans in the popular imagination, the corporate elite is fragmented (Mizruchi 2013), and the inner circle has disappeared (Chu and Davis 2016). Moreover, corporate lobbying is reshaping state-level legislation (Lafer 2017), the Koch brothers are the face of the political influence of wealth, and aggressive “venture philanthropy” is reshaping social institutions.

Domhoff (2015) suggests that despite these types of changes, owners and top-level corporate executives continue to rule, with policy-planning networks crucial vehicles for cohesion formation. Recent years have seen the rise of a new institutional form, “venture philanthropy,” which fits Domhoff’s model quite well, given their success in implementing public policy on their own terms. The question here is whether these new organizational forms are a natural extension of the policy-planning process analyzed in the various editions of *WRA?*, and whether the tools pioneered in those publications can help us understand the changes found in the current historical moment. To address this, I present a brief overview of the role of “venture philanthropy” in redesigning the U.S. educational system, paying particular attention to questions of elite unity and mechanisms through which public policy is formulated and implemented. In doing so, I hope that this may identify some fruitful questions for further research.

Venture philanthropy is rooted in neoliberalism and brings the practices and languages of the private sector to the world of nonprofits, where

grants are investments, impact and metrics are common catchwords (Boris and Winkler 2013), market solutions reign, and education is seen through the lens of workforce development (Lipman and Jenkins 2011). Building on traditional conservative philanthropies, it has adopted many of the strategies and the philosophy of established foundations, which were themselves political actors (Scott 2009). The old-style Olin Foundation, for example, clearly a political force, helped create a number of right-wing think tanks—including the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Hoover Institution—that remain highly influential today (Scott 2009). Even the more liberal Ford Foundation was generating public policy as early as the 1950s, eventually turning to funding municipal union-busting efforts (Domhoff 1998).

What distinguishes venture philanthropy from earlier forms is its wealth, goals, and audacity. In a short four years after the publication of the third edition of *WRA?*, for example, the landscape of private funding for K-12 changed fundamentally with the four dominant traditional groups—the Annenberg Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the Kellogg Foundation—replaced by the Gates and Walton foundations (Ravitch 2010). And while traditional philanthropies framed their mission in terms of the public good (Saltman 2009), the central agenda of the new breed of “corporate-controlled foundations” (Domhoff 2014) is to remake the educational system in their own image. Now joined by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, “their boldness,” Ravitch (2010) writes, “was unprecedented,” wanting “nothing less than to transform American education” (p. 199).

The aim of this “corporate reform movement” (Ravitch 2013) is to privatize K-12 using charter schools, vouchers, and tax credits as mechanisms, and high-stakes testing, school closings, and teacher termination as strategies. Although, as Domhoff (2014) has noted, attempts to shape public opinion are fraught, this effort has been remarkably successful albeit far from complete. They have framed the discourse about the direction of public education in the United States and they have helped institutionalize standardized testing as *the* measure of school achievement. Their most recent success is the appointment of Betsy DeVos of school voucher fame as Secretary of Education.

Educational reform venture philanthropy has quickly developed a well-integrated policy network echoing those so well described in *WRA?*. Cohen (2007) identified 132 different organizations of various sizes in the school voucher or tax credit movements alone, spanning 43 states and ranging from funding agencies, to parent groups, to nationally important think tanks of various political stripes familiar to any Domhoff reader. These include the neoconservative Hudson, Manhattan, and American Enterprise institutes;

the Libertarian Cato Institute; the neoliberal Center for Education Reform; the centrist Progressive Policy Institute; and the left-leaning Center for American Progress (DeBray-Pelot et al. 2007). Indeed, about 30% of the organizations identified were national and multi-issue, suggesting that the educational corporate reform movement is integrated into a larger policy formation network that transcends ideology and is committed to a larger agenda. Currently, “Americans for Prosperity,” founded by the Koch brothers, and the states’ rights, “American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), are lobbying state legislatures throughout the country for expanded private school choice, underscoring the breadth of the coalition.

Regional efforts appear to have similar organizing structures. Tracing the ties of sponsors of Washington State’s charter school–reform movement, Au and Ferrare (2014) found national leadership, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the Bezos Family Foundation, and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, as well as a solid Wall Street connection with the Goldman Sachs Foundation. Consistent with earlier work on policy networks, we conclude that “elite individuals make use of local nonprofit organizations as a mechanism to advance their education policy agenda by funding those nonprofits through the philanthropic organizations affiliated with those same wealthy individuals” (Au and Ferrare 2014, p. 1).

Particularly striking in the Washington State example is the dominance of funding agencies bankrolled by new wealth, including the Robertson Foundation (of Tiger Global Management LLC fame), The Donald and Doris Fisher Foundation (Gap Clothing), and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (Dell Computers) (Au and Ferrare 2014; Scott 2009). But, as noted previously, the coalition for school reform is much broader than high tech and hedge fund wealth and also includes, as Ravitch (2010) points out, a collection of “strange bedfellows,” ranging from corporations hoping to profit from privatization, to those who simply believe that the private sector is more innovative than the public sphere. It also includes a number of large urban school districts that have adopted many practices underwritten by venture philanthropy, as well as the U.S. Department of Education, where policy-network think tank members cycle in and out of high-level positions (DeBray-Pelot et al. 2007).

The push to reform public education in the United States, then, is a multipronged effort organized around big wealth. Although hundreds of private groups collectively spend more than \$4 billion a year, the current big three (The Gates, Walton, and Broad foundations) collectively control the effort, dedicating millions of dollars to outreach to the media, national and regional governments, and voters (Barkan 2011). They have invested aggressively in

politicians eager to support charter school expansion and school choice more broadly (Fabricant and Fine 2012), and they earmarked \$60 million to convince both political parties to embrace their version of school reform (Barkan 2011). Apparently, this latter effort was an exceptionally good investment, given that in 2015 the “Every Student Succeeds Act,” which House Speaker Paul Ryan called “the biggest rewrite of our education laws in 25 years,” passed the Senate in a bipartisan vote (Fabian 2015). In addition, The Gates Foundation alone spent more than \$200 million to fund the creation of Common Core, the current K-12 standards, and to enlist a wide assortment of advocacy groups in its support.

The coalition is also in the business of leadership training, that is, preparing managers who share their worldview for upper-level positions in urban school districts and, in this way, they are trying to shift credentialing from universities to the corporate world (Saltman 2009). The Broad Foundation has taken the lead in this, with a \$136 million investment that seems to be quite successful: their website boasts that 84% of graduates of their management-training program have served in cabinet-level positions of local school systems (Broad Foundation 2017). In 2009 alone, their students filled 43% of all superintendent openings in large urban districts (Barkan 2011), suggesting that their particular ideological frame will drive school management for years to come.

Paralleling the push for alternative leadership programs, a number of smaller foundations have established non-university-based teacher preparation options that train college graduates for the classroom. Particularly well known is “Teach For America,” which began with foundation funding, later supplemented with significant federal support (Scott 2009), and serves to build an undereducated, uncertified, non-unionized teacher labor force (Saltman 2009). Interestingly, Michele Rhee, the architect of the Washington, D.C., educational restructuring plan designed with funding by venture philanthropy in mind, was a product of Teach For America.

Alternative leadership and teacher preparation programs have both been central to the post-Katrina restructuring of the New Orleans school system, which has become a poster child for the venture philanthropy model of educational reform. Indeed, “Teach For America” places record numbers of instructors in New Orleans schools, with an administration dominated by Broad Foundation leadership graduates (Scott 2009). Here, non-unionized charter schools, voucher programs, and a model of market competition have replaced the (admittedly awful) public school system (Ravitch 2010).

In addition to their New Orleans success, the corporate reform movement has made systematic progress in implementing their charter-school agenda, although traditional public schools still educate a vast majority of



U.S. students. In 2014, of the 50 million students enrolled in K-12, more than 2.5 million in 40 states and the District of Columbia went to a charter school, a number that more than doubled in a ten-year period. More striking, though, are the inroads in large urban districts, their target locations. Indeed, the tension between the public and the private advocates is most forceful in the inner city, although few locales have experienced a transformation on the scale of the New Orleans school district. Cities in New York, California, and Texas, as well as the District of Columbia in particular, are targets for expansion (Scott 2009) as well as Memphis and other parts of Louisiana (Credo 2013).

The irony, given venture philanthropy's emphasis on accountability and metrics of evaluation, is that the charter school, their best success thus far, is not a clear winner when it comes to improving educational outcomes. Although studies have produced contradictory evidence on this over the years, the push for charters continues uninterrupted. Renzulli and Roscigno (2007) summarized the early finding succinctly when they wrote that the evidence is mixed, while more recent work suggests that, although charter schools do not improve student achievement, they do seem to have a positive effect on high school graduation rates and college attendance (Berends 2015). These results are quite modest given the stakes, undermined further by the thorny questions about student selection and comparability. In short, it is surprising to see a full-court press for a strategy with such equivocal results.

The growth of charter schools preempted vouchers as vehicles for expanding school choice in the face of constitutional challenges to the latter. Nevertheless, school voucher programs that allow public funds to pay for secular and religious private school exist in 15 states and the District of Columbia, with an estimated enrollment of 446,000 (Goldstein 2017). With the appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, we should be hearing much more about vouchers in the coming months and years.

Here, too, however, the advantages of voucher programs are not clear-cut. Recent research suggests that, at least in Louisiana and Indiana, voucher recipients scored lower on both reading and math than those who remained in their original schools. Taken together, the data on charter schools and voucher programs suggest that the venture philanthropy agenda in education may not be a very effective strategy for improving outcomes, and that the practices of the private sector may not serve the public well. Nevertheless, the coordinated effort of wealthy individuals and their affiliated institutions continues to reinvent K-12 and, despite periodic setbacks, they continue to formulate policies that profoundly affect students.

This abbreviated description of venture philanthropy's educational reform movement demonstrates that the policy formation network of WRA<sup>2</sup> is alive

and well in the 21st century, with alliances cross cutting traditional ideological categories. Indeed, it is hard to remember a more targeted effort with as high a probability of success. This tells us that elites can still unify; indeed, it is a striking example of a coordinated effort by a well-developed policy network. At the same time, as predicted by *WRA?*, there have been failures. Michele Rhee's headline-grabbing attempt to restructure Washington, D.C.'s, school system ended in defeat. More recently, voters in Massachusetts rejected a charter-school expansion question on their ballot and as of this writing, despite Republican control in Iowa, proposals to expand school choice programs have stalled. This reminds us that ideological domination, as Domhoff suggested, is never complete. However, it is hard to imagine that the push for privatization will wane anytime soon.

What is new in this example? One of the things that has changed in recent years is the importance of the local level. Nationally coordinated regional efforts at policy formation have received much attention of late, given ALEC's practice of delivering right-wing legislation to state capitols for implementation. The movement to restructure public education demonstrates that this type of organization is more far-reaching; that broad coalitions of corporate actors operate on the national and state levels simultaneously, and they do so quite effectively. It would be interesting to know what conditions facilitate this type of coordination.

The second thing new here is the specter of race. Although *WRA?* was sensitive to the racial composition of the elite, power structure researchers did not see the racial implications of the policies that they studied as a central concern. The educational reform agenda of venture philanthropy is racialized, and this explains why it targets large urban areas. In recent years, only about 24% of students enrolled in charter schools were white (National Alliance for Charter Schools 2017), an unremarkable statistic given the geographical focus of the movement, and a rhetoric of school choice promoting equality.

However, critics suggest that, rather than rebuilding public schools into functioning entities, the charter schools of venture philanthropy perpetuate racial stratification in numerous ways. This includes their tendency to increase drop-out rates (Fabricant and Fine 2012) and, in the case of New Orleans at least, by creating a network of elite schools for more privileged students that excludes kids of color (Saltman 2009). Put more forcefully, Lipman (2011) writes that the restructuring of education in the United States is deeply racialized, centered on urban communities of color where public schools are either closed or privatized, and subject to a minimalist curriculum driven by the need for standardized-test preparation. This suggests that

it would be fruitful to examine how elite policy impacts on different groups, with a particular focus on race.

Also of interest is whether changing political paradigms affect elite policy preferences and the elite's organizing capacity. It is easy to understand the corporate school reform movement as a neoliberal project, organized around the privatization of public services and the belief in education as a vehicle for labor force development. With this lens, the focus on the inner city schools, even with a strategy producing a very modest return on investment, makes sense. Low-income kids of color receive qualitatively different and cheaper educations than their white, more affluent counterparts, with different jobs in their futures (Au 2015). This occurs in a process of educational triage providing "basic skills training for millions of workers, more advanced education for supervision for middle class and . . . the brightest of the working classes, and elite education for scions of the capitalist, and other sections of the ruling classes" (Hill 2006, p. 26).

This suggests that unity on school reform is rooted in a shared vision of how to mediate the cost of education on the one hand, with the need for a trained labor force, on the other, and this is what has generated a broad-based coalition of left, centrist, and right-wing groups. To what extent, then, can a changing political economic paradigm overcome the fractional interests and ideological differences within the elite and, thus, how does it impact on the capacity of the elite to unify?

This leads to the most important question about elite control: how much unity is enough? WRA<sup>2</sup> captured the commonalities and fissures in elite policy outlooks, recognizing that coordination can never be complete, whereas venture capital's attack on public education demonstrates that cohesion remains possible and potentially transformative. What is not clear, however, is how unified an elite must be to prevail on a particular issue. To put this another way, how much dissent undermines a coordinated effort?

And what about other policies? Early 2017 witnessed a legislative fiasco on health care reform. Analyses of previous efforts at reforming health care have disagreed about the role of a unified corporate community in determining the fate of those initiatives. In the most recent example, it would be important to know the role of the elite—whether they were unified enough to torpedo the Republicans' proposal for replacing the Affordable Care Act and if not, what if anything does it say about elite power?

At this writing, a border adjustment tax that would levy a 20% tariff on imported goods is under discussion as part of a tax reform package that Congress will consider. This will be fought by Walmart (of the Walton Foundation fame), but this time without Bill Gates as a natural ally. Many believe

that the inner circle and/or financial institutions mediated among different interests of this sort, producing policy preferences that were best for capital, in general. Despite the striking capacity for unity illustrated by venture philanthropy's sojourn into educational policy, it is not clear that a centralized policy-planning network can fulfill this broader function.

Research examining the policy formation networks of these (and other contemporary) issues would go a long way in identifying the extent to which the elite can still organize on a broad range of topics. But this would still leave the question of how much is enough. A motivating force of *WRA?*—and a number of the many, many studies flowing from Domhoff's work—was the pluralist assumption that, although corporations were extremely powerful when unified, individual interests would generate a diverse set of coalitions with different victors on different issues. The question that remains then is: how much unity is necessary for an elite to rule.

Thus, while venture philanthropy seems to be a natural extension of the policy-planning process that *WRA?* identified so well, questions about elite capacity and elite unity endure. Over the years, G. William Domhoff raised a number of these, while presenting a coherent portrait of unified corporate power. At this particular historic moment, pursuing these questions and continuing his work is more important than ever, particularly if it can lead to developing strategies for change.

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