

## The Backstory on RJ Johnson and his “Conservative Action for America” Part 3 of a New Guide to the Right-Wing Groups Targeting the Wisconsin Supreme Court By Lisa Graves and Evan Vorpahl

### Long-time political operative Richard “RJ” Johnson is targeting the Wisconsin Supreme Court through a new dark money group called “Conservative Action for America, Inc.”

(CAFA). CAFA is reportedly spending at least a quarter million dollars backing circuit court Judge Jennifer Dorow,<sup>1</sup> whom Gov. Scott Walker appointed in 2011. She graduated from Regent University School of Law (launched by Pat Robertson as the Christian Broadcasting Network University) in 1996, the year that it won full accreditation from the American Bar Association.<sup>2</sup>

**Zoom In: CAFA is just the most recent secretly-funded front group deployed by Johnson to influence Wisconsin elections and it’s not even based in Wisconsin.** He registered it in Arizona last year using a purchased address. Johnson has a documented history of raising dark money in elections to help his powerful GOP friends, like Scott Walker. Key details are here:

- **CAFA appears to be an out-of-state conduit to cloak who is influencing elections.** He registered it as a 501(c)(4) non-profit in 2022 but it has no apparent website and yet it is injecting a six-figure sum from secret sources into the Wisconsin Supreme Court race. In 2022, he moved \$776K using CAFA to a Super PAC in Washington, DC, called “Convention of States Political Fund” (COSPF), that he had created two days earlier. COSPF spent more than a million dollars in state races in 2022, as detailed by CMD.<sup>3</sup>
  - **Johnson is also tied to the CAFA PAC, whose million-dollar funder is Texan Timothy Dunn,** who made a fortune in Permian Basin drilling. That PAC is run by Mark Meckler, who leads the “Convention of States” (COS) effort to amend the U.S. Constitution and who led the alt-right site Parler and Tea Party Patriots. CAFA PAC has paid a retainer of \$2K/mo to Johnson’s consulting firm with Deb Jordahl.
- **Johnson was at the center of the John Doe II criminal probe into election activities, and his legal defense fund received \$1,930,000 from a non-profit that is a core part of Leonard Leo’s efforts to reshape American courts and law.** Between 2014 and 2016, the “Judicial Education Project” (JEP, which is now called the “85 Fund”) made three grants to a trust in Delaware for Johnson’s defense, cumulatively giving it more than any other grantee in that period. **The original source of this tax-exempt gift to assail the bipartisan prosecution investigating Johnson and others is not publicly known.**
  - In 2015, after Gableman and Prosser refused to recuse from the case—documents published by *the Guardian* later showed that Walker credited Johnson with being key to their elections—the Wisconsin Supreme Court halted that probe from further pursuit of Johnson, Eric O’Keefe, Wisconsin Club for Growth, WMC, and others.

In addition to the defense fund, JEP’s secret funders have allowed it to pay big law firms to write amicus briefs attacking gay marriage, contraceptive access, and worker rights.<sup>4</sup>

**The Bottom Line: CAFA is a new front in the shell game of moving secret money into elections that Johnson has been at the forefront of for years.**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2023/02/10/wisconsin-supreme-court-race-expected-to-top-6-million-dollar-spending-february-primary-2023/69890580007/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/VA-news/VA-Pilot/issues/1996/vp960807/08070339.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [https://politicalpractices.mt.gov/docs/2022-Complaints-and-ONC/Center-for-Media-and-Democracy-v-Convention-of-States-Political-Fund\\_hard-copy.pdf](https://politicalpractices.mt.gov/docs/2022-Complaints-and-ONC/Center-for-Media-and-Democracy-v-Convention-of-States-Political-Fund_hard-copy.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://truemorthresearch.org/2020/10/snapshot-of-secret-funding-of-amicus-briefs-tied-to-leonard-leo-federalist-society-leader-promoter-amy-coney-barrett/>

## Curated Resources about RJ Johnson, His Legal Defense Fund, CAFA, and More

- Patrick Marley, Dan Bice, and Lee Bergquist, “Walker wanted funds funneled to Wisconsin Club for Growth,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (August 22, 2014). [Link](#)
- Lincoln Caplan, “The Destruction of the Wisconsin Supreme Court,” *the New Yorker* (May 15, 2015). [Link](#)
- Ed Pilkington, “Because Scott Walker Asked,” *The Guardian* (September 16, 2016). [Link](#)
- Arn Pearson, “Convention of State Politicians: Voters Have No Role to Play in the Right’s Vision of a Constitutional Convention,” ExposedbyCMD (January 31, 2022) [Link](#)
- Sourcewatch, “R.J. Johnson,” Center for Media and Democracy. [Link](#)
- Alex Sakariassen, “Convention of States group violated campaign law,” *Montana Free Press* (June 20, 2022). [Link](#)
- Grace Panetta and Brent Griffiths, “Republicans' next big play is to 'scare the hell out of Washington' by rewriting the Constitution. And they're willing to play the long game to win.” *Business Insider* (July 31, 2022). [Link](#)
- Center for Media and Democracy, “Straw Donor Complaint Against Richard A. Johnson” (August 5, 2022). [Link](#) (Johnson denied the allegations, and the complaint was [dismissed](#) last year.)

## Key Documents

- CAFA PAC 2022 October quarterly FEC filing. [Link](#)
- Conservative Action for America Inc. registration (January 19, 2022). [Link](#)
- Conservative Action for America Annual Corporate Report (2023). [Link](#)
- Judicial Education Project 2014 form 990. [Link](#)
- Judicial Education Project 2015 form 990. [Link](#)
- Judicial Education Project 2016 form 990. [Link](#)

**About this series.** Together, Lisa Graves and Evan Vorpahl have been covering [outside spending in state supreme court races](#) since 2019, including [in Wisconsin](#). Graves has lived in Wisconsin for more than a decade and graduated from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse before attending Cornell Law School. Vorpahl is a native Wisconsinite who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. True North Research is a national watchdog group, and Graves is the President of the Board of the Madison-based Center for Media and Democracy, which she previously led for eight years, writing and editing numerous Wisconsin and national stories.

Graves received the Milwaukee Press Club’s “Excellence in Journalism” Award for her coverage of the Wisconsin Supreme Court race in 2011. Her investigations of the American Legislative Exchange Council (“ALECexposed”) have won an “Izzy”/I.F. Stone Award and the Association for Education in Journalism’s “Professional Freedom and Responsibility” Award, whose other recipients include Bill Moyers and Molly Ivins—in addition to other honors.

Graves previously served as Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the Office of Legal Policy in the U.S. Department of Justice where she worked on judicial nominations, federal and state court relations, and other policies; as the Chief Counsel for Nominations for the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee where she handled judicial nominations; as the Deputy Chief of the Article III Judges Division of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, where she advised judges and judicial programs on anti-corruption measures; and other posts. She has testified before Congress about the U.S. Supreme Court, the U.S. Postal Service, FOIA reform, and national security matters.

She is one of the nation’s foremost experts on the infrastructure of right-wing groups, both nationally and in the states, and how their billionaire funders and influence are regressing American public policies and institutions.

For additional information about this series, please contact Evan Vorpahl via [evan@truenorthresearch.org](mailto:evan@truenorthresearch.org).