



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on May 9, 2023

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## The Review

### States Peddle Impossible Fantasy

*For a Dollar and a Dream: State Lotteries in Modern America*, by Jonathan D. Cohen, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022, 288 pages, hardcover.

Gambling is usually a means of getting nothing for your money. Or, worse, it is a way for people to go broke by trying to get rich. A whopping 45 of the 50 U.S. states are deep into the pockets of their residents via this oh-so-legal enterprise, otherwise known as state lotteries. The products that they push as supposedly crucial money-makers for the state (though that is a lie) offer odds that are minuscule for players, otherwise known as bettors.

Some dare call this a sucker bet. Others (such as the New York Lottery) insist: “You gotta be in it to win it.”

This is their story.

There are 33 million Americans — or one of every eight adults — who buy into these schemes every single week. As is usually the case with government ventures, it started small (though with big promises), with the first state lottery in modern times beginning in 1964 in New Hampshire, with sales of \$5.7 million, jumping eventually to a total of \$91.4 billion by 2020 among the 45 states then involved.

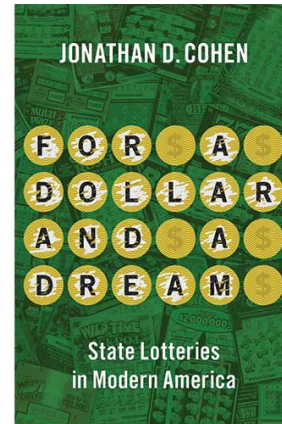
In the volume under review, we hear from lottery proponents, opponents, and folks in-between. The peddlers get their chances too, including an Ohio Lottery executive who maintains, “We don’t sell lottery tickets. We sell dreams.”

It is a very sizeable illusion, as we learn:

Roughly half of American adults play the lottery at least once a year, and one in four do so at least once a month, holding out the hope that they will overcome the odds standing between them and a massive windfall. Americans spend more on lottery tickets every year than on cigarettes, coffee, or smartphones, and they spend more on lottery tickets annually than on video stream services, concert tickets, books, and movie tickets *combined*.

[Emphasis in original.]

And if by some very far-fetched chance one does hit it big, the government will be sure to tax the winnings. But we don’t hear about that part.





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## Pipe Dreams Spread

Jonathan Cohen, the author of *For a Dollar and a Dream: State Lotteries in Modern America*, is a program officer at the American Academy of Arts & Sciences who received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Virginia; he has written on gambling policy and other topics for various publications. While his book is not neutral on the issue, his treatment is generally more balanced than argumentative. This rather detailed narrative also draws from the archives of 17 states. Cohen's personal views on lotteries are assuredly not hidden, but they become more apparent in the book's conclusion.

The stage is set with past accounts about gambling and lotteries such as, for example, those in ancient Rome. (Cohen mentions Nero's raffles. He could also have noted that Augustus "mollified the poor with state grain, lotteries and occasional gifts," as historian Will Durant related.) There are references to various lotteries in Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Also noted are the early days of this nation, with the author quoting a remark from a Boston newspaper in 1791, which observed that "Every part of the United States abounds in lotteries."

The tide in this country shifted in the 1820s, with most states banning such games. By the time of the Civil War, lotteries were prohibited in all states but Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri. After an unsettled time following the war, the last sweepstakes left was the creature of the Louisiana State Lottery Company (aka "The Serpent" or "The Golden Octopus"). Its monopoly was advanced and strengthened by bribery of legislators. Finally, in the early 1890s, recounts Cohen, "Congress enacted a series of bills designed to slay the Octopus, by, for instance, blocking the transportation of lottery tickets and advertising across state lines."

While that led to the end of legal lotteries (for quite a while), lotteries did not disappear. Cohen also links other associated themes in his account, including race, income distribution, and criminal activities. Gambling, he writes,

remained widespread around the country, including illegal lotteries, private card games, sports bets with bookies, underground casinos, or lotteries based overseas. Beginning in the 1920s, by far the most prominent form of illegal gambling was the numbers, daily three-digit lotteries that could be played for as little as a few pennies. These games were a pervasive part of urban African American life in New York, Chicago, and other major cities. Until the rise of state-run sweepstakes, numbers games informed most Americans' beliefs about how lotteries worked and who played them.

If you are of a certain age and lived or worked in or near such areas, you'll probably nod at that point. That life is not just a cinema creation.

As the book's title suggests, it centers on the growth of what ensued in the state lottery resurrection — with a first wave of legalizations between 1963 and 1977 in the Northeast and parts of the Rust Belt (New Jersey is emphasized); a second wave in California and other states in the early 1980s, with ballot initiatives driven by Scientific Games Inc.; "Lottomania" in the 1980s; and the spread to the South in the 1990s (with Georgia being highlighted). Hefty attention is paid to advertising, as well as the impact of religion and politics.

Graphics include a map with state lotteries identified by their first date of ticket sales, as well as a



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figure that rises continually, especially since the mid-1970s, depicting nationwide lottery sales. We meet major official players and the little folks, with the human touch being provided by personal experiences.

A woman in Georgia named Ashani Acquaviva is one such. She's played lotteries for two decades, we are told, and spends roughly \$400 monthly, or about \$5,000 annually. She has a "strategy" of sorts — playing certain numbers when she thinks they are "due" or when she has a good feeling about those numbers. She no longer works. The woman acknowledges to the author that she thinks about the lottery a lot more now than when she worked. Writes Cohen:

When I asked what prize would make her stop her lottery habit, she first says \$30,000. Then she admits that she meditates on \$1 million. Of course, she dreams of winning a whole lot more, and sums of \$10, \$50, or \$80 million come to mind. Whenever she drives past a sign bearing the lotto jackpot, she waves, smiles, and says she'll see it in her bank account soon.

These are your state government dollars at work.

## Infinitesimal Odds of Winning

*For a Dollar and a Dream* gives the reader plenty of material to assimilate. The author does, for example, tell you more about the odds (in context) than you'll get from the promoters of the lotteries (where it will be usually found in tiny print). Cohen is also probably on target when he observes that so many of the players care a lot more about the size of the potential jackpot than their microscopic chance of winning.

For informational purposes, here are some excerpts from a table in the book with the odds of winning the New York Lottery during certain past formats: The chance of winning a 1985 game, with odds of one in 12 million, was roughly the same as becoming an astronaut; hitting a 1999 game, with odds of one in 18 million, was as likely as being canonized; and a 2001 game, at one in 45 million, offered around the same odds as being killed by a venomous snakebite in the United States.

Then, just for chuckles and/or headshaking, see how likely the jackpot was in 2021 for a particular MegaMillions lottery: Hitting "the MegaMillions is the equivalent of releasing an ant onto an area the size of roughly four football fields, randomly sticking a pin into the ground, and hitting the ant." (For some reason, that brings to mind the popular quote from the '90s movie *Dumb and Dumber*: "So you're telling me there's a chance?")

For all its merits, however, the book also earns more than its share of demerits. Some are minor and could be fixed by judicious editing — such as the inaccurate assertion that the "casting of lots" in the Bible was a lottery game. A few demerits go for hyperbole, a venial sin in this case, but they include such excuses as this: "For most Americans, a lottery jackpot was their only chance at the newest definition of the good life."

Others are more basic. In his justifications, the author repeatedly deprecates the supposedly growing "income inequality" in this country. Similarly, he decries our alleged fewer opportunities and the "growing concentration of wealth," as if those are plausible reasons to trigger the actions of lower-income bettors. Clearly concerned not to engage in "victim-blaming," the author specifically shuns calling lotteries a "stupid tax" or a "tax on people who are bad at math" (his terms), then leans heavily in the opposite direction. The nation's economic conditions, he imputes, "have *compelled* tens of



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millions of Americans every single week to reason that their best hope for a new life lies in the luck of the draw.” (Emphasis added.)



**Not a cash cow:** State lotteries have been sold by their promoters as a good revenue source for cash-strapped state governments. In reality, however, lotteries have failed to live up to the hype. (AP Images)

However, just because the government goes out of control doesn't oblige individuals to do likewise. It's a bit too much to explain away folks, presumably at the dead-end of hopelessness, going to the light through some scratch-off tickets.

To his credit, Cohen does remind readers of some of the empty promises made by promoters of lotteries and their various champions. For instance, he recalls that New Jersey Democratic Congressman Cornelius Gallagher projected that if all the revenue of illegal gambling (a reference to “numbers games”) could “be channeled to the state through a legal lottery, we could abandon all taxation in New Jersey and increase every service in our state four times over.” It didn't work out that way.

As Cohen recalls, even after it became clear that “a lottery could not replace new taxes, the something-for-nothing ethos that drove lottery legislation remained. In its first six years, the New Jersey lottery raised, on average, 2.5 percent of total annual state revenue.” (One thing that Cohen does not point out is that Gallagher — once thought to be on LBJ's short-list for vice president — pled guilty in 1972 to tax evasion and perjury and was imprisoned.)

In reviewing his evidence, Cohen does note that proponents of lotteries are correct in saying that certain designated beneficiaries have been winners, such as those awarded scholarships from their revenues. Yet he also observes that such programs might well have been enacted without lotteries. The something-for-nothing chimera that states bet on, it turns out, didn't pan out as promised. All the states in the nation (less Alabama, Alaska, Hawaii, Nevada, and Utah) wound up (in 2020) with lotteries that accounted for just 2.3 percent of their total budgets. Frequently, we also find, the lotteries did not save funds by supplanting other tax spending, but rather supplemented it.

In his conclusion, Cohen observes that state lotteries

appeal disproportionately to less-well-off-gamblers who stake their hopes for wealth on the promise of a jackpot with infinitesimal odds. Whether intended this way or not, lottery advertising and the growing size of jackpots have helped foster an unhealthy obsession with



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opulence and the idea that the only successful life is one lived in luxury. And the ubiquity of lotteries can lead to unhealthy play, including problem gambling. As state agencies, lotteries appear to run counter to the purpose of all other branches: to promote the greater good, not to sell a product to the public.

Winding down, the author is not equivocal, concluding that “state lotteries should not exist in the modern United States.”

Nevertheless, Cohen acknowledges that he is “under no illusions that any state will seriously consider repealing its lottery.” That sounds like a sure thing.



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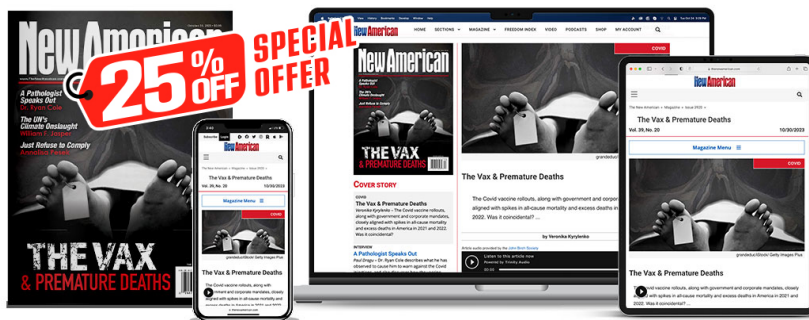
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