



How “Zuckerbucks” Infiltrated & Influenced the 2020 Florida Election

Hayden Dublois, *Research Analyst*

Nic Horton, *Research Director*

Key facts:

- According to preliminary data, Florida localities received more than \$7 million in “Zuckerbucks.”
- 80 percent of Florida counties with populations of more than one million requested or received funding.
- While the grants were framed as COVID-19 related, available data suggests a tiny fraction of the dollars were requested for personal protective equipment.
- Zuckerbucks appear to have boosted Democrat turnout in parts of Florida.
- Neighboring Georgia experienced significant changes in election outcomes and turnout based on where Zuckerbucks were infused.

Overview

During the 2020 presidential election, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, spearheaded by the wife of Facebook overlord Mark Zuckerberg, donated \$400 million to election efforts, with the large majority of the funds going to the Center for Technology and Civic Life (CTCL).¹⁻² CTCL also receives funding from Google and is run by a former Obama Foundation fellow, whose stated goal is to “make U.S. elections more inclusive.”³

CTCL’s election grants—or “Zuckerbucks”—were largely pitched as resources to help states grapple with COVID-19-related challenges and “safely serve every voter.”⁴ In an October Facebook post, Mark Zuckerberg said the funding was “to support election officials” and address “unprecedented challenges.”⁵ But a quick dive into the available data shows that the funds were largely requested for get-out-the-vote efforts, influenced Democrat vote turnout, and may have actually impacted the results of the election in some states.

Where did the money go?

According to preliminary data on grants reported by NPR, Zuckerbucks went to local election jurisdictions across the country, infiltrating 47 out of 50 states.⁶ The Sunshine State, given its electoral significance, was of course included and was one of the top recipients in terms of total dollars.

According to NPR, CTCL funneled more than \$7 million into roughly 16 percent of Florida’s counties—and 80 percent of Florida counties with a population of more than one million.⁷⁻⁸ Although dollar amounts are not yet available for each county, NPR reports that the largest known amount of funding went to Miami-Dade County, a Democrat stronghold.⁹

Zuckerbucks Poured into Florida in 2020

COUNTY	ZUCKERBUCKS AMOUNT
Miami-Dade	\$2,482,440
Leon	\$1,437,486
Broward	\$1,424,971
Brevard	\$850,808
Alachua	\$707,606
Hernando ¹⁰	\$111,824
Osceola	\$109,404
TOTAL¹¹	\$7,124,539

Source: National Public Radio

How was the money spent? Not on PPE.

A full tally of how the Florida Zuckerbucks were spent is not yet available and it will take some time before the full picture is known. But some information is available from grant applications for localities around the country and it reveals—at least based on these limited examples—only a fraction of the funding was requested for personal protective equipment (PPE).

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the city requested a mere \$250,000 for PPE.¹² This represents less than 2.5 percent of the total funding the city requested and received.¹³ More than 97 percent of the funds requested were for other items, including \$5.5 million for “mail-in and absentee and processing equipment,” \$2.3 million for “satellite election offices for in-person mail-in voting,” and more.¹⁴ Nonetheless, city officials told CTCL the grant would allow the city to “reduce the risk of exposure to coronavirus”—as well as “be intentional and strategic in reaching our historically disenfranchised residents and communities.”¹⁵

Chester County's grant request, just outside of Philadelphia, included more than \$1 million for ballot drop boxes, nearly half a million dollars for "absentee ballot assembly and processing equipment," and more than \$200,000 for an "oversized postcard" to all registered voters, as well as a promotional video in Spanish and English, amongst other outreach expenses, including \$5,000 for an online voter registration drive.¹⁶ They stated their intent to spend \$150,000 on PPE, sanitizer, and other COVID-related hygiene products—less than six percent of their total grant request amount.¹⁷

Preliminary grant reports from local government due on January 31, but it is unclear how much they might reveal to the public about how exactly the money was spent. CTCL's report template includes very broad purposes like "election administration equipment," and "non-partisan voter education," providing little clarification on how the money was actually spent.¹⁸

At least one county in Arkansas has already reported they spent exactly \$0 of their more than \$62,000 in grant funds for PPE.¹⁹

Indeed, these same trends have played out in certain counties in Florida: according to the Alachua County Supervisor of Elections Office, **zero percent of the \$707,606 received by Alachua County went to PPE.**²⁰

Much still remains unknown and much more analysis is needed to definitively conclude where the majority of "Zuckerbucks" were spent, but based on these limited examples, **it appears the funds were much less about protecting voters from COVID-19 and much more about registering and getting Democrat voters into the polls.**

Zuckerbucks influenced Florida's election

The allocation of Zuckerbucks—according to NPR reports—closely mirrors Florida's top population zones, as well as its traditionally "swing" areas—including Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Kissimmee, Tampa, and more.²¹ Zuckerbucks were also given to high-Democrat areas—in fact, 78 percent of counties that voted for Clinton in 2016 received Zuckerbucks, while just seven percent of the counties Trump carried in 2016 received Zuckerbucks.²²

Furthermore, there is some evidence that Zuckerbucks had an impact on the election results by mobilizing Democrat voters.

For example, in Leon County and Gadsden County, overall voter turnout increased by similar amounts.²³ But Leon County—which preliminarily received more than \$1.4 million in Zuckerbucks, while Gadsden County did not receive any—saw a significant uptick in *Democrat* turnout, as compared to 2016.²⁴

Overall, in Zuckerbucks-infused Leon County, the number of Democrat-presidential voters increased by more than 12 percent, while the number of Republican presidential voters increased by just 6.8 percent over the same period.²⁵

By contrast, in Gadsden County without Zuckerbucks, Republican turnout increased more than Democrat turnout.²⁶

Leon County with \$1,437,486 in Zuckerbucks

	2016 VOTES	2020 VOTES	PERCENT DIFFERENCE
Support for Republican Presidential Candidate	53,821	57,453	+ 6.8 Percent increase
Support for Democrat Presidential Candidate	92,068	103,517	+ 12.4 Percent increase
			Net + 5.6 for Democrat Candidate

Gadsden County with No Zuckerbucks

	2016 VOTES	2020 VOTES	PERCENT DIFFERENCE
Support for Republican Presidential Candidate	6,728	7,465	+ 11.0 Percent increase
Support for Democrat Presidential Candidate	15,020	16,153	+ 7.5 Percent increase
			Net + 3.5 for Republican Candidate

Put simply, these two adjacent counties—with historically similar voting patterns—experienced wide differences in turnout swings amongst voters for the Democrat candidate for president and the Republican candidate for president. The difference between them was that, according to NPR, Leon received Zuckerbucks—Gadsden did not. And, unsurprisingly, Leon saw the change in Democrat turnout offset the change in Republican turnout, while Gadsden saw the opposite trend.

The **same exact patterns were visible in several other pairs of contiguous counties**, including Brevard and Volusia counties, Lake and Polk counties, and Wakulla and Liberty counties—indicating a trend of greater Democrat performance compared to 2016 in counties that received Zuckerbucks relative to their neighboring counties.²⁷

President Trump improved on his performance in Florida in 2020 because of statewide and local trends that ultimately offset the influence of Zuckerbucks—but there remains evidence that Zuckerbucks likely influenced Democrat turnout.

Zuckerbucks significantly influenced Georgia's Leftward shift

While President Trump may have ultimately been able to overcome Zuckerbucks' influence statewide in Florida, this was not the case in neighboring Georgia, which may serve as a warning sign for red states like Florida that are concerned about the influence of California billionaires in their elections.

For example, according to NPR, Georgia received more than \$27 million in Zuckerbucks.²⁸ The average Georgia county moved 0.86 percentage points to the Left among the two-party vote share.²⁹ But further examination shows that counties that did *not* receive Zuckerbucks barely budged at all while counties that received Zuckerbucks shifted 2.4 percentage points to the left, on average, indicating they essentially drove the state's overall leftward shift, significantly higher than the statewide average.³⁰

Overall, an astonishing 75 percent of counties that received Zuckerbucks saw Democrat turnout outweigh Republican turnout.³¹

In the instance of Georgia, the data is clear: Zuckerbucks influenced the election outcome.

What Florida can do to protect its elections

States are recognizing that private and not-for-profit money directly influencing elections is a problem. Some, in fact, are moving to disallow the use of private funds to help run elections. For example, in Louisiana, legislators approved a measure that would ban this practice entirely.³² Florida can and should prohibit private organizations from financing election processes to protect its elections from outside influence and prevent it from becoming the next Georgia.

¹ Nicholas Riccardi, "Mark Zuckerberg donates \$100M more to help election offices," AP News (2020), <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-election-2020-technology-local-elections-elections-c2dcfde7fc750b7dd64243b0cf7fbb69>.

² Michael Scherer, "Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan donate \$100 million more to election administrators, despite conservative pushback," Washington Post (2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/zuckerberg-chan-elections-facebook/2020/10/12/0e07de94-0cba-11eb-8074-0e943a91bf08_story.html.

³ Tianna Epps-Johnson, Center for Tech and Civic Life, <https://www.techandcivillife.org/team/tiana-epps-johnson/>.

⁴ Center for Tech and Civic Life, "COVID-19 response grants," <https://www.techandcivillife.org/our-work/election-officials/grants/>.

⁵ Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook post, (2020), <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10112459455098901>.

⁶ Tom Scheck et al, "How Private Money From Facebook's CEO Saved The 2020 Election," NPR (2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/08/943242106/how-private-money-from-facebooks-ceo-saved-the-2020-election>.

⁷ NPR incorrectly noted that Escambia County received grant funds; according to a public records request, they did initially request funds but ultimately withdrew their request.

⁸ Authors' calculations based on county populations and grant amounts. See, e.g., Tom Scheck et al, "How Private Money From Facebook's CEO Saved The 2020 Election," NPR (2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/08/943242106/how-private-money-from-facebooks-ceo-saved-the-2020-election>.

⁹ Tom Scheck et al, "How Private Money From Facebook's CEO Saved The 2020 Election," NPR (2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/08/943242106/how-private-money-from-facebooks-ceo-saved-the-2020-election>.

¹⁰ Data obtained from a response to a public records request submitted by the authors to the Hernando County Supervisor of Elections. Hernando County did not spend \$27,719.64 of their \$111,824.00 grant.

¹¹ This total excludes an additional four counties that are expected to have received funding but for which dollar amounts were not specified. According to the terms of the grant, the minimum award amount was \$5,000, suggesting a minimum of another \$20,000 in Zuckerbucks spent in Florida, for a total projected minimum amount of \$7,144,539.

¹² <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2020/12/07/private-grant-money-chan-zuckerburg-election>

¹³ Authors' calculations based on total CTCL funding requested for personal protective equipment and the total funding received by the city of Philadelphia. See, e.g., <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2020/12/07/private-grant-money-chan-zuckerburg-election>.

¹⁴ Tianna Epps Johnson, "Philadelphia CTCL Grant," (2020), <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/7273726/Philadelphia-CTCL-Grant.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Geoff Hing, et al., "How private money helped save the election," APM Reports (2020), <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2020/12/07/private-grant-money-chan-zuckerburg-election>.

¹⁷ Authors' calculations based on itemized requested funds by Chester County, Pennsylvania and total awarded funds. See, e.g., William Turner, "Grant Transmittal Form," Chester County, Pennsylvania (2020), <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/20404695/chester-co-pa-ctcl.pdf>.

¹⁸ Center for Tech and Civic Life, "CTCL COVID-19 Response Grant Report," CTCL (2021), <https://form.jotform.com/210018751820143>.

¹⁹ Authors obtained on February 22, 2021, in response to a public records request, a copy of Faulkner County, Arkansas's CTCL grant report. The report revealed that the county received \$62,807.50 in grant funds, but \$0 was spent on personal protective equipment.

²⁰ Response to a public records request submitted by the authors to the Alachua County Supervisor of Election's Office.

²¹ Tom Scheck et al, "How Private Money From Facebook's CEO Saved The 2020 Election," NPR (2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/08/943242106/how-private-money-from-facebooks-ceo-saved-the-2020-election>.

²² Authors' calculations based on NPR reported grants, responses public records request, and 2016 election results.

²³ Authors' calculations based on changes in election results and turnout between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as reported by the Florida Secretary of State's Office.

²⁴ Tom Scheck et al, "How Private Money From Facebook's CEO Saved The 2020 Election," NPR (2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/08/943242106/how-private-money-from-facebooks-ceo-saved-the-2020-election>.

²⁵ Authors' calculations based on changes in election results and turnout between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as reported by the Florida Secretary of State's Office.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Author's calculations based on changes in election results and turnout between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as reported by the Georgia Secretary of State's Office. All relationships described are statistically significant.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Wesley Muller, "Governor vetoes bill that sought to prohibit election grant money," Louisiana Illuminator (2020), <https://lailuminator.com/briefs/governor-vetoes-bill-that-sought-to-prohibit-election-grant-money/>.