



How “Zuckerbucks” Infiltrated and Influenced the 2020 Iowa Election

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Key facts:

- According to preliminary data, Iowa localities received more than \$1 million in “Zuckerbucks.”
- 67 out of 99 Iowa counties requested or received Zuckerbucks.
- Zuckerbucks boosted Democrat turnout in parts of the state.
- Iowa can and should protect its election processes from outside influence.

Overview

During the 2020 presidential election, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative donated \$400 million to election efforts across the country, with most of the funding being directed through the Center for Technology and Civic Life (CTCL).¹ 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.”²

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.”³ In a Facebook post from October, Mark Zuckerberg said the funding was meant to “support election officials” and address “unprecedented challenges.”⁴ The grants themselves are called “COVID-19 response grants.”⁵

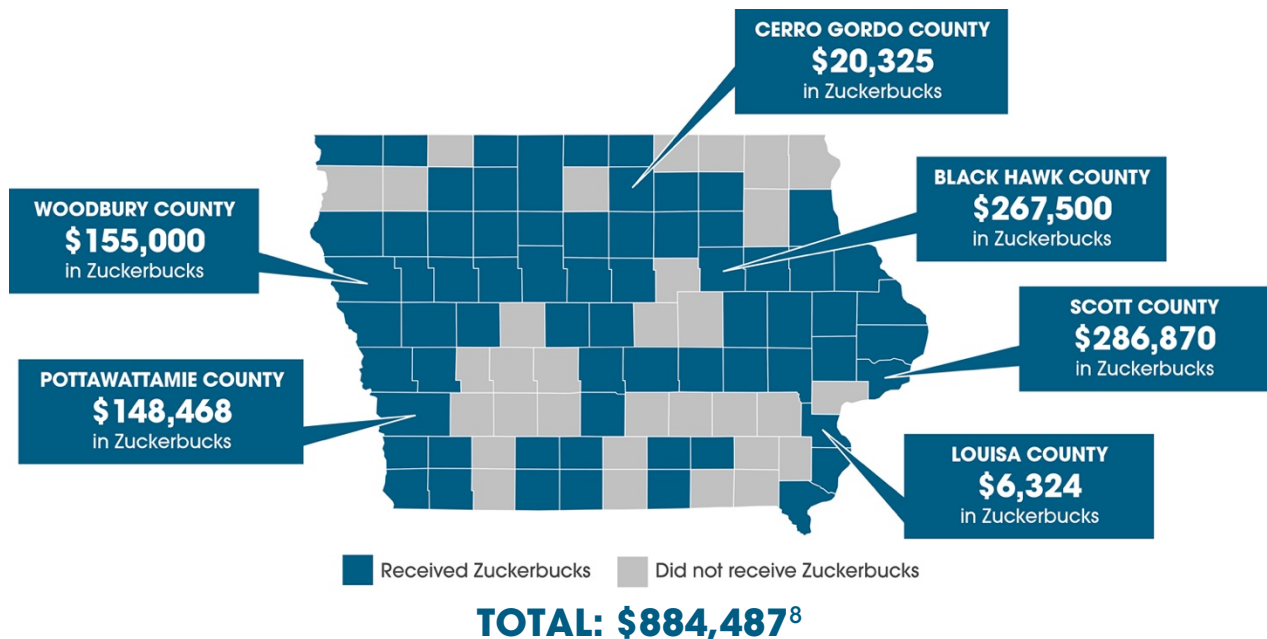
But a quick glance at the available data shows that the funds were largely spent for voting efforts, increased Democrat turnout in some areas, and may have actually impacted the results of the election in some states.

Where did the money go?

Nationally, the influence of Zuckerbucks is far reaching. According to preliminary data on grant reports by NPR, election officials in 47 out of 50 states received the funds, including Iowa.⁶

In fact, preliminary data suggests that CTCL funneled more than \$1 million into nearly 70 percent of the counties in Iowa during the 2020 presidential election.⁷ Total spending is publicly available for just six Iowa counties so far, highlighted below, and totals at nearly \$900,000.

ZUCKERBUCKS POURED INTO IOWA IN 2020



Source: National Public Radio

How was the money spent? Not on PPE.

While grant reports from local governments to CTCL were due on January 31, a full picture of how these funds were ultimately spent is not yet clear, including a more complete view of how Zuckerbucks were spent in the Hawkeye State. However, some data has become available for a few states and it does not paint a pretty picture. In fact, despite public assurances that these funds were needed for “safety” and “COVID-19-related” precautions, it increasingly looks like only a tiny fraction portion of Zuckerbucks were requested for the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE).

In Wisconsin—a pivotal 2020 battleground state that ultimately flipped from Donald Trump to Joe Biden—the five largest cities requested and obtained a grant from CTCL. The five mayors of these cities requested more than \$6 million from CTCL, claiming the state elections in April consumed most of their operating budget set aside for elections.⁹ Without the Zuckerbucks, the mayors argued, they would have been forced to choose between safety and the right to vote.¹⁰

However, despite these claims, less than 14 percent of the proposed funds were projected to go towards safety measures.¹¹ Indeed, *significantly* more money was requested for get out the vote efforts than for safety equipment.¹²

In Milwaukee, only 3.3 percent of funds were requested for PPE.¹³ In Racine, only 2.1 percent of grant funds were expected to be funneled into PPE, while more than quadruple the funds were spent on early voting efforts.¹⁴

In Chester County, Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia, local officials requested more than \$1 million on absentee ballots and processing equipment.¹⁵ An additional \$200,000 was requested for an “oversized postcard” to be mailed to all registered voters that encouraged them to vote.¹⁶ Funds were also spent on Spanish and English promotional videos.¹⁷ Overall, less than six percent of their total grant request was designated towards PPE.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

Much still remains unknown and much more analysis is needed to definitively conclude how the majority of “Zuckerbucks” were actually spent, but based on these limited examples of how localities said they intended to spend the funds, **it appears this was much less about protecting voters from COVID-19 and much more about registering and getting Democrat voters to the polls.**

Zuckerbucks influenced Iowa’s election

All six counties that have disclosed Zuckerbucks grant amounts saw increased voter turnout from the 2016 presidential election to the 2020 election. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, all but one of these counties saw turnout increases that favored Democrats.²⁰ The remaining county saw a modest turnout increase that was more favorable to Republicans—but its grant was only \$6,000, compared to the tens and hundreds of thousands granted to the other five counties.²¹

In contrast, of the counties that didn’t receive any Zuckerbucks, 69 percent saw turnout for the Republican presidential candidate exceed any increase in turnout for the Democrat presidential candidate.²²

For example, the neighboring counties of Scott and Muscatine saw almost identical increases in overall turnout, of about 13 percent.²³ But Scott County—which, according to NPR, received \$286,870 in Zuckerbucks, the highest known amount in the state—saw a significant uptick in *Democrat* turnout that outweighed Republican turnout.²⁴

By contrast, Muscatine County did not receive any Zuckerbucks and saw an increase in Republican turnout that outweighed Democrat turnout.²⁵

SCOTT COUNTY WITH \$286,870 IN ZUCKERBUCKS

| | 2016 VOTES | 2020 VOTES | PERCENT DIFFERENCE |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|---|
| Support for Republican Presidential Candidate | 39,149 | 43,683 | + 11.6 Percent increase |
| Support for Democrat Presidential Candidate | 40,440 | 46,926 | + 16.0 Percent increase |
| | | | Net + 4.4 for Democrat Candidate |

MUSCATINE COUNTY WITH NO ZUCKERBUCKS

| | 2016 VOTES | 2020 VOTES | PERCENT DIFFERENCE |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|---|
| Support for Republican Presidential Candidate | 9,584 | 10,823 | + 13.0 Percent increase |
| Support for Democrat Presidential Candidate | 8,368 | 9,372 | + 12.0 Percent increase |
| | | | Net + 1.0 for Republican Candidate |

In other words, these two adjacent counties—with relatively similar voting patterns—experienced differences in turnout swings for the Democrat and Republican candidates for president between 2016 and 2020. The primary difference between them, according to NPR, is that Scott County received Zuckerbucks—more than any other reported county in the state—while Muscatine County did not receive a dime. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, Scott County saw the increase in Democrat votes outweigh the increase in Republican votes, while Muscatine County experienced the opposite trend.²⁶

What Iowa can do to protect its elections

States are recognizing that private and non-for-profit money directly impacting elections at the state and local level is a problem. Seeing how Zuckerbucks were requested for PPE, and then spent on other “priorities” only furthers the point. Some states are mobilizing and taking back control. In Louisiana, for example, lawmakers advanced a measure that bans this practice altogether.²⁷ Iowa should follow suit and move to protect the sanctity of its elections for the sake of all Hawkeyes.

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 Center for Tech and Civic Life, "Tiana Epps-Johnson," CTCL (2021), <https://www.techandciviclife.org/team/tiana-epps-johnson/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark Zuckerberg Facebook post, retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10112459455098901>.

⁵ Center for Tech and Civic Life, "COVID-19 Response Grants," CTCL (2021), <https://www.techandciviclife.org/our-work/election-officials/grants/>.

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 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>.

⁸ This total excludes an additional 61 counties 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 of \$305,000, for a total projected minimum of \$1,189,487 in Zuckerbucks spending in Iowa.

⁹ Gracie Stockton, "Wisconsin Safe Voting Plan 2020," APM Reports (2020), <https://beta.documentcloud.org/documents/7325312-Wisconsin-Safe-Voting-Plan-2020>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 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>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 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>.

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

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Wesley Muller, "Governor vetoes bill that sought to prohibit election grant money," Louisiana Illuminator (2020), <https://lailluminator.com/briefs/governor-vetoes-bill-that-sought-to-prohibit-election-grant-money/>.