

How “Zuckerbucks” Infiltrated and Influenced the 2020 Pennsylvania Election

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Key facts:

- According to preliminary data, Pennsylvania localities received more than \$20 million in “Zuckerbucks.”
- More than 90 percent of counties that reportedly received Zuckerbucks saw an increase in Democrat votes that offset Republican votes.
- Democrat counties received 92 percent of the total amount spent in the Pennsylvania.
- While the grants were framed as COVID-19 related, available data suggests a tiny fraction of the dollars were requested for personal protective equipment

Overview

During the 2020 presidential election, the Center for Technology and Civic Life (CTCL) awarded more than 2,500 grants to election offices across the country. CTCL was founded by a former Obama Foundation fellow and lists big tech companies such as Google and Facebook among its key funders and partners.¹⁻² The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, spearheaded by the wife of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, was another large funder of the CTCL, contributing \$350 million to the initiative so that CTCL could regrant the funds to local jurisdictions.³⁻⁴

These grants—or “Zuckerbucks”—were sold as resources to help states grapple with COVID-19-related challenges and “safely serve every voter.”⁵ In an October Facebook post, Zuckerberg himself said the funding was to address “unprecedented challenges” related to the pandemic.⁶ 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?

Based on CTCL's self-reported list of grant awardees, Zuckerbucks went to local election jurisdictions across the country, infiltrating 47 out of 50 states.⁷ Considered the keystone for both parties' path to an electoral college victory, the Keystone State figured prominently in CTCL's distribution of funds and was a top recipient of grant dollars.

While CTCL has not yet disclosed full details about how much was distributed to each grantee during the 2020 election, preliminary data shows that CTCL funneled more than \$20 million into 23 Pennsylvania jurisdictions, plus the Pennsylvania Department of State.⁸ The \$2.5 million that went to Chester County, which received the second most generous grant in Pennsylvania, was more than the county's entire 2020 budget for voting services.⁹ Additionally, according to the list of grants announced by CTCL, Pennsylvania was one of only two states to receive a statewide grant.¹⁰

Philadelphia, which is only slightly larger than Allegheny County, received nearly five times as many Zuckerbucks.¹¹⁻¹² The makeup of the electorate in the two counties is telling. Democrats account for 76 percent of the electorate in Philadelphia, compared to only 57 percent in Allegheny County.¹³

Curiously, in the case of Dauphin County, an original grant request of \$206,471 was later more than doubled.¹⁴ This county narrowly went for Hillary Clinton in 2016.¹⁵ But in 2020, Joe Biden increased the Democrat vote total here by *22 percent*, more than offsetting President Donald Trump's increased performance.¹⁶ Biden ended up winning Dauphin County by more than 12,500 votes.¹⁷

ZUCKERBUCKS POURED INTO PENNSYLVANIA IN 2020

| COUNTY/ MUNICIPALITY | ZUCKERBUCKS AMOUNT |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Philadelphia | \$10,016,074 |
| Chester | \$2,558,080 |
| Delaware | \$2,200,000 |
| Allegheny | \$2,052,251 |
| Centre | \$863,828 |
| Lehigh | \$762,635 |
| Dauphin | \$482,165 |
| Lancaster | \$474,202 |
| Berks | \$470,929 |
| York | \$321,600 |
| Luzerne | \$200,000 |
| Erie | \$148,729 |
| Monroe | \$113,634 |
| Mercer | \$54,414 |
| Northumberland | \$45,000 |
| Somerset | \$37,104 |
| Pike | \$26,070 |
| Wayne | \$25,098 |
| Venango | \$21,218 |
| Mifflin | \$17,930 |
| Juniata | \$11,364 |
| TOTAL¹⁸ | \$20,902,334 |

Sources: APM Reports and Foundation for Government Accountability

How was the money spent? Not on PPE.

Full grant reports from jurisdictions to CTCL were due on January 31. These reports should hopefully shine more light on how the funds were specifically spent. But the data that is currently available reveals that only a fraction of the funding was even requested for personal protective equipment (PPE).

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for example—where the entire operating budget for the office of the city commissioners is \$12.3 million—received a \$10 million grant.¹⁹ Of that \$10 million, the city requested a mere \$250,000 for PPE.²⁰ This represents less than 2.5 percent of the total funding the city requested and received.²¹

In the grant request, Philadelphia outlined plans to spend more on 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.²² Despite the grant being specific to offsetting the challenges of conducting elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic, city officials closed their application by noting that the funds would allow the city to “be intentional and strategic in reaching our historically disenfranchised residents and communities.”²³ While perhaps a laudable goal, this is obviously not related to COVID-19.

Just outside Philadelphia, Chester County made a grant request that 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.²⁴ Their stated intent to spend \$150,000 on PPE, sanitizer, and other COVID-19-related hygiene products accounted for less than six percent of their total grant request amount.²⁵

These preliminary numbers only indicate how the money was *intended* to be spent. Answers to questions about *actual* spending remain largely unknown due to lack of transparency in the process.

But even with more data and inspection, specifics may still be unknowable if jurisdictions do not have detailed records. After 10 meetings and review of numerous documents relating to the 2020 election, Luzerne County’s Ad Hoc Election Inquiry Committee was **“unable to determine the direct chain of command regarding application and management of [the CTCL grant], including how the funds were spent.”**²⁶

Zuckerbucks were mostly spent in Democrat counties and influenced Pennsylvania's election

Based on available data, it seems clear that the allocation of Zuckerbucks was greatest to Democratic jurisdictions.²⁷ While several Pennsylvania counties that received Zuckerbucks went for Trump in 2020, **Zuckerbucks-receiving counties that broke for Biden received the lion's share of the funds—more than \$19 million, or 92 percent of the total amount spent in the commonwealth.**²⁸ Philadelphia received an astounding \$6.32 per capita.²⁹

Furthermore, there is some evidence that Zuckerbucks had an impact on the election results by mobilizing Democrat voters. More than 90 percent of counties that receive Zuckerbucks saw an increase in Democrat votes that offset the change in Republican votes.³⁰

The use of private funds also apparently enabled elections officials to behave differently. As Delaware County Councilwoman Christine Reuther noted, "Because I'm not using taxpayer dollars for a lot of these initiatives, I can be more aggressive than maybe some of the other counties can."³¹ Specifically, Zuckerbucks allowed Delaware County, and others, to spend money to set up drop boxes before the legality of drop boxes had even been determined.³²⁻³³⁻³⁴

What Pennsylvania can do to protect its elections

Pennsylvania legislators recognized that private and not-for-profit money directly influencing elections would be a problem prior to the 2020 election and made attempts to protect the integrity of the election, both in court and through legislative action.³⁵⁻³⁶ Mark Zuckerberg himself has even acknowledged that it is generally inappropriate for private citizens to finance elections.³⁷ Pennsylvania should not give up the fight and should take action to prohibit private organizations from financing and exerting influence over elections.

1 Center for Tech and Civic Life, <https://www.techandcivillife.org/key-funders-and-partners/#>.

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

3 Carlie Porterfield, "Zuckerberg Donates Additional \$100 Million TO Support Election Efforts While Facebook Accused Of Spreading More Misinformation," *Forbes*, (2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2020/10/13/zuckerberg-donates-additional-100-million-to-support-election-efforts-while-facebook-accused-of-spreading-more-misinformation/?sh=74ff3c9f56b7>.

4 Center for Tech and Civic Life, "CTCL Receives \$250M Contribution to Support Critical Work of Election Officials," <https://www.techandcivillife.org/open-call/>.

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

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

7 Center for Tech and Civic Life, "CTCL Program Awards Over 2,500 COVID-19 Response Grants," <https://www.techandcivillife.org/grant-awards/>

8 Authors' calculations based on APM Reports reported grants and responses to public records requests. See, e.g., 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-zuckerburg-election>.

- 9 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>.
- 10 Center for Tech and Civic Life, "CTCL Program Awards Over 2,500 COVID-19 Response Grants," <https://www.techandcivillife.org/grant-awards/>
- 11 Tianna Epps Johnson, "Philadelphia CTCL Grant," (2020), <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/7273726/Philadelphia-CTCL-Grant.pdf>.
- 12 Response to a public request submitted by the authors to the Allegheny County Open Records Officer.
- 13 Pennsylvania Department of State, "Voting & Election Statistics," Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, <https://www.dos.pa.gov/VotingElections/OtherServicesEvents/VotingElectionStatistics/Pages/VotingElectionStatistics.aspx>.
- 14 Response to a public request submitted by the authors to the Dauphin County Open Records Officer. Dauphin County reported that the county originally applied for \$206,401 but was subsequently awarded \$482,164.50.
- 15 Department of State, "2016 Presidential Election Official Returns: Dauphin," (2016), <https://www.electionreturns.pa.gov/General/CountyResults?countyName=Dauphin&ElectionID=54&ElectionType=G&IsActive=0>.
- 16 Author's calculations based on changes in election results and turnout between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of State.
- 17 Author's calculations based on changes in election results and turnout between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of State.
- 18 This total excludes an additional three jurisdictions, including the grant to the PA Department of State, 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 \$15,000 in Zuckerbucks spent in Pennsylvania for a total projected minimum amount of \$20,917,334.
- 19 Jonathan Lai, "Philly is about to get \$10 million for mail ballot drop boxes, early voting, and raises for poll workers," The Philadelphia Inquirer, (2020), <https://www.inquirer.com/politics/election/philadelphia-2020-election-funding-20200826.html>.
- 20 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>.
- 21 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>.
- 22 Tianna Epps Johnson, "Philadelphia CTCL Grant," (2020), <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/7273726/Philadelphia-CTCL-Grant.pdf>.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 William Turner, "Grant Transmittal Form," Chester County, Pennsylvania (2020), <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/20404695/chester-co-pa-ctcl.pdf>.
- 25 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>.
- 26 Election Inquiry Committee, "Luzerne County Election Inquiry Committee Meeting: Jan 28, 2021," Luzerne County, (2021), <https://www.luzernecounty.org/AgendaCenter/Election-Inquiry-Committee-46>.
- 27 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>.
- 28 Authors' calculations based on APM Reports reported grants and responses to public records requests. See, e.g., 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>.
- 29 Scott Walter, "Zuckerberg's Return on Investment in Pennsylvania," Capital Research Center, (2021), <https://capitalresearch.org/article/zuckerbergs-return-on-investment-in-pennsylvania/>.
- 30 Authors' calculations based on APM Reports reported grants, responses public records request, and 2016 election results.

31 Jonathan Lai, "Philly is about to get \$10 million for mail ballot drop boxes, early voting, and raises for poll workers," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, (2020), <https://www.inquirer.com/politics/election/philadelphia-2020-election-funding-20200826.html>.

32 Delaware County announced it had accepted the \$2.2 million grant on August 19, 2020 and that the money would be used to place 50 drop boxes, before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court had ruled on the legality of using drop boxes in the 2020 general election.

33 Delaware County, "Delaware County Awarded \$2.2 Million Grant for Safe Elections," Delaware County Pennsylvania, (2020), <https://www.delcopa.gov/publicrelations/releases/2020/safeelectionsgrant.html>.

34 Sam Gringlas, "Pennsylvania Supreme Court Extends Vote By Mail Deadline, Allows Drop Boxes," NPR, (2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/17/914160122/pennsylvania-supreme-court-extends-vote-by-mail-deadline-allows-drop-boxes>.

35 Bret Pallotto, "Centre County is set to receive an \$863,000 election grant. Here's why some state lawmakers want to block it," *Centre Daily Times*, (2020), <https://www.centredaily.com/news/politics-government/election/article246062940.html>.

36 Cynthia Fernandez, "Pa. GOP advances election bill that would ban drop boxes, get mail-in ballots to voters earlier," *WHYY*, (2020), <https://whyy.org/articles/pa-gop-advances-election-bill-that-would-ban-drop-boxes-get-mail-in-ballots-to-voters-earlier/>.

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