



Mark Zuckerberg Actually Donated Some of His Riches to a Good Cause. Republicans Want to Block Him From Ever Doing It Again.

Nick Tabor

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The Facebook CEO donated hundreds of millions of dollars to bolster election infrastructure. Now Republicans around the country are pushing bills to starve election officials of desperately needed cash.

Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg donated more than \$400 million to aid election workers around the country during the pandemic.

Election offices are in a funding crisis. In hundreds of counties and cities across the United States, outdated voting machines need to be replaced. Personnel costs have gone up, as threats to election workers have been on the uptick. Even the cost of paper has skyrocketed—at a time when polling offices are using more of it than ever, thanks to the rise in mail-in voting. Independent groups have estimated that as much as \$53 billion will be needed in the next decade to ensure elections can be conducted securely and fairly.

Against this backdrop, at least half a dozen state legislatures, dominated by the GOP, have advanced bills this spring that deal with election funding. But instead of addressing this crisis, these bills have a different aim: making sure that whatever happens, the shortfall will not be paid for with money from private grants or charitable benefactors.

Why deprive election departments of additional funding that can help close these gaps? The effort is a reaction to the 2020 election, during which Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan donated \$419.5 million that made its way to thousands of polling stations around the country. It helped pay for infrastructure, personal protective equipment, and mailers that informed voters about how they could cast their vote safely during a pandemic, among other needs.

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With support from a dark-money group called the Foundation for Government Accountability, or FGA, Republicans in numerous statehouses have been pushing legislation to ban these kinds of donations—which the FGA has dubbed “Zuckerbucks”—from ever being made again. The playbook is to use the kind of language that’s more often heard on the political left: the idea that elections are a public good that ought to be paid for out of public coffers and that the influence of billionaires can have a corrosive effect on democracy.

These arguments are correct, as far as they go. They're also uncontroversial; there seems to be broad agreement across the political spectrum that election offices shouldn't have to rely on third-party funding for their basic functions. However, it's hard to take this rhetoric seriously when it's not accompanied by a campaign to ramp up government spending on elections and solve the problems that inspired Zuckerberg's donation in the first place.

These new state laws should also be understood in the context of the Republicans' broader response to the 2020 election: their widespread refusal to accept Donald Trump's loss, and the new voting restrictions that many states have imposed in the name of ensuring "election integrity." Without an influx of federal and state dollars to the offices of city and county clerks, these bans on private funding will likely amount to one more measure that undermines elections instead of protecting them.

This controversy dates back to the spring of 2020, when it became clear that Covid-19 might throw the November elections into chaos. The first stimulus bill, which was passed that March, included \$400 million to help election officials prepare; but virtually no one thought this paltry sum would be enough to head off the challenges presented by the pandemic.

In a congressional hearing that summer, state election officials pleaded with legislators to set aside more money. The director of the Kentucky State Board of Elections said the primary alone had swallowed up nearly 60 percent of the funding his office received. A widely circulated estimate was that \$4 billion was needed altogether. House Democrats took up this recommendation, voting to budget another \$3.6 billion—but the measure died in the Senate. "The need for voter education was extreme," recalled David Becker, the executive director of the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation and Research, who was in frequent contact with election officials around the country. "The resources weren't coming."

Another organization working closely with election officials was the Center for Tech and Civic Life, or CTCL, which is based in Chicago. CTCL was hosting semiweekly webinars where it trained election officials on how to conduct safe elections under the pandemic conditions, and the attendance had climbed to the hundreds. The need for more funds was a constant refrain from the clerks who participated. "It's great if we know what it takes to administer a safe process," said Tiana Epps-Johnson, the executive director of CTCL, paraphrasing their remarks. "But it's another thing to do it, if we don't have the funds that are required."

CTCL is nonpartisan. It does have roots in liberal politics: The three people who founded the organization in 2012 were all former staffers of a Democratic technology firm. But the director of its board, Pam Anderson, is a longtime Republican from Colorado with extensive experience as a county clerk, and the group routinely works with officials from both parties and with public servants in nonpolitical roles.

When Zuckerberg and Chan decided to donate money to help with the fall elections, CTCL was well positioned to be the main conduit. "Folks realized that we really had an on-the-ground view into the challenges election officials were facing," Epps-Johnson said. It received \$350 million to distribute. Zuckerberg and Chan also gave David Becker's organization \$69.5 million to dole out, for state election departments to run voter education campaigns. In a Facebook post announcing the decision, Zuckerberg admitted the situation wasn't ideal. "I agree with those who say that government should have provided these funds, not private citizens," he wrote. "I

hope that for future elections the government provides adequate funding. But absent that funding, I think it's critical that this urgent need is met.”

Unsurprisingly, the donations were not met with universal goodwill. Zuckerberg's name was poison to much of the political right. Rumors had long been circulating that Facebook targeted conservatives for censorship, despite abundant evidence to the contrary. It was an article of faith that Zuckerberg was a liberal and was secretly trying to help Democrats. Moreover, much of this funding was meant to help with mail-in voting, a method that Trump had been claiming would encourage fraud. A conservative legal group filed lawsuits in nine swing states, trying to block the donations. All of those challenges eventually failed, and some 2,500 election offices—from counties rural and urban, red and blue—applied for grants. Each one that applied received money.

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It's important, of course, to treat initiatives like this one with skepticism and scrutiny. Benefactors like Zuckerberg have agendas of their own, and groups that benefit from their donations should also be transparent and accountable. But the available evidence suggests that both of the nonprofits that distributed grants carried out the work in a genuinely nonpartisan manner. In the end, the majority of the money CTCL distributed did go to urban areas, where most voters were likely to be Democrats; but Epps-Johnson makes a plausible case that this was not the result of bias on the organization's part.

The list of grantees was self-selecting, since jurisdictions had to apply in order to get money. Some clerks in conservative states ultimately turned down grants because they feared political blowback, they told CTCL, and Louisiana's attorney general tried to block the donations statewide. Urban areas also needed more cash, because the per-capita cost of running elections tends to be higher in big cities. Even so, roughly 70 percent of the grants were awarded to election departments that serve fewer than 25,000 registered voters. There were no partisan questions in the application.

The case of Anderson County, Kentucky, is instructive. It's a community of 22,000, roughly 40 minutes west of Lexington. “I was very leery when I applied for that grant,” said Jason Denny, the Republican county clerk, in a legislative hearing earlier this year. But his concerns died down as he went through the process. He received about \$10,000, with no restrictions on how he could use it. It paid for mailers that were sent to every voter, informing them about how to cast ballots in person under the pandemic conditions, as well as a trailer where the workers set up extra voting stations. (Denny would have asked for more, he said, but “I didn't want to be hoggish.”) In the end, he and other county clerks managed to “pull off a nearly perfect election—one of the smoothest elections that Kentucky's ever seen.”

In the months afterward, however, as Trump and his supporters groped around for evidence that the contest had been rigged, the CTCL grants started coming in for more criticism. The Foundation for Government Accountability (which has ties to better known right-wing groups, including the American Legislative Exchange Council, the State Policy Network, and the Cato Institute) published several reports showing that most of the grant money had gone to Democratic-leaning urban areas. It argued that CTCL had “targeted” the donations in ways that helped Joe Biden and his party. Its findings made the rounds in conservative media, first in The

Daily Signal and Newsmax and later in The Wall Street Journal's Opinion page. The New York Post and The Federalist also published similar research.

The FGA's work also helped propel a wave of legislation. A federal bill, introduced by New York Republican Representative Claudia Tenney and championed by her Colorado colleague Lauren Boebert, which would have banned private grants in future elections, stalled in the House last year. But similar bills have been more successful at the state level: At least 10 of these bills passed in 2021, and others are being pushed this spring.

Again, Kentucky makes a useful case study. This past February, when a "Zuckerbucks" bill was introduced in a House committee, the FGA's local lobbyist, Bryan Sunderland, did most of the talking. He spoke of CTCL "infiltrating" election offices and about his group "uncovering" where the money was donated. No one in the room pointed out that Sunderland himself was working on behalf of an expressly political group that gets funding from billionaires.

Only three committee members opposed the measure. "Anything that seems to hinder, reduce, or cut into voter access, I'm going to be against," said Representative Buddy Wheatley, one of the dissenters, in a phone interview. Another, Representative Attica Scott, gave The New Republic a similar explanation, saying Kentucky needs "as much financial support as we can get." (The third committee member simply thought the bill needed some revision before reaching the House floor.)

The state's legislature is tentatively planning to put \$25 million in its next budget for counties to upgrade their voting machines. But even if that money goes through, Wheatley said many election offices will still be short on operating funds, especially for personnel.

At the national level, too, election officials have been warning that the dire funding shortage didn't end with the worst part of the pandemic. MIT researchers found last year that among public services, elections rank near the bottom for the amount of funding they receive—putting them on par with the amounts local governments spend on parking facilities.

A report from the Election Infrastructure Initiative (a group affiliated with CTCL) estimates that over the next decade, \$256 million will be needed to boost postelection audits, \$935 million to upgrade voter registration systems, and \$1.8 billion to replace aging voting machines. But the largest expense category will be personnel and other operating costs, at a total of \$49.3 billion. As David Becker points out, concerns about election fraud only drive up those costs. Some states are now requiring 24-hour surveillance of ballot drop boxes, for instance, and others are restricting early voting, which leads to bigger crowds on election days (and requires more poll workers, in turn).

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Recent efforts to address this funding gap have failed to get bipartisan support. The House's original proposal for the omnibus spending bill, which was released last summer, included \$500 million for election-security grants; but in the version that was passed earlier this month, that figure had been negotiated down to just \$75 million, a massive cut from the amounts that were budgeted in 2018 and 2020. And in December, the top election officials of 14 states sent Biden a letter, asking him to budget \$5 billion for election infrastructure in the next fiscal year, in hopes of reaching \$20 billion over the next decade. Since then, 33 Senators—Democrats

all—have called on him to fulfill this request. (It seems the White House took this into account: In the budget proposal Biden released this week, he called for \$10 billion to be spent on election assistance over the next 10 years, along with \$5 billion for the U.S. Postal Service, some of which would bolster mail-in voting.)

A refrain from the FGA and its legislative allies has been that “public elections should be financed by public money.” But absent a serious push by conservative politicians and think tanks to provide that public money, the obvious conclusion is that they have different interests in mind. To Becker, it looks like “sore loser–ism.” As he points out, Trump and his allies have raised massive amounts of cash by trumpeting their claims that the 2020 election was stolen. But as their explanations of fraud have been debunked, they’ve gotten more creative. “They have to come up with a way of continuing the grift,” Becker said, “and explaining why the loser didn’t lose.”

But there’s another element at play. For the party that lobbied to prevent a definitive count of the Florida ballots in 2000, that sought to undermine faith in the 2020 election before it even occurred, and that has passed many recent laws that will undoubtedly hamper voter turnout, making sure that future elections go off without a hitch is simply not a high priority. If anything, Election Day controversies are most likely to redound to the party’s benefit. This is a clear example of Steve Bannon’s call to “flood the zone with shit,” or to distribute enough disinformation that news consumers will conclude the truth is unknowable. There’s little doubt that for beleaguered election officials, who are just trying to perform a vital civic service, money would be preferable.

The implications are clear. If money for election needs is not set aside soon, the results in future years could be dire. And next time around, using private funds might not be an option—for better or worse.