

# PUBLIC INTEREST

— LEGAL FOUNDATION —

## **Building Bias: Urban Texas Counties Used \$36 Million in ZuckBucks in 2020 Election**

**March 2021** – Flush with cash from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, the Center for Tech and Civil Life (CTCL) flooded key Texas county election offices with cash to adopt procedures preferred by the outside group. With the dust on the election settled, it's time to discern how the money was spent, if it influenced outcomes, and just how much cash are we talking about? The answer is, the private money started the process of turning Texas toward procedures outside of the normal statutory framework for running elections.

### **What Were Counties Promising to Do with the Money?**

Grant award letters reviewed by the Foundation showed Texas counties were given money to help shift voting to the mail and away from traditional procedures in Texas law. The large blue-leaning counties received huge sums to transform their elections. Smaller red counties did not receive anything close. Mandated changes included were:

- ✓ Drive-thru voting
- ✓ Mail voting sorting assets
- ✓ Polling place rental expenses
- ✓ Temp labor expenses, hazard pay
- ✓ Personal protective equipment (PPE)
- ✓ Voter education/outreach/radio costs

<b><u>County</u></b>	<b><u>Amount</u></b>
Dallas	\$15,130,433.00
Harris	\$9,600,000.00
Webb	\$2,820,960.00
Bexar	\$1,900,000.00
Cameron	\$1,853,729.00
Tarrant	\$1,678,522.50
Travis	\$1,144,709.00
El Paso	\$846,133.75
Fort Bend	\$506,500.00
Hays	\$289,075.00
Williamson	\$263,644.00
Hidalgo	\$196,500.00
Brooks	\$92,225.00
Maverick	\$47,075.00
<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>	<b><u>\$36,369,506.25</u></b>

### **How Much Money Was Given?**

The CTCL and various Texas counties were not always transparent on how the money was spent at the time—or even that they received funds. Some were more open than others. The rough estimate between large and politically close counties was \$25 million shortly before the election. **PILF accounted for \$36 million across 14 of these counties.**

### **Did This Money Influence the Outcome of the Election?**

When you build expansive efficiencies in some counties, you increase the capacity in those counties. Raw voter turnout helps to see differences between 2020 and 2016. Keeping in mind that turnout was up nationally and Texas grew in population since 2016, there are notable trends. Urban and nearby suburban counties within the 14 studied roughly presented a 30 percent increase in turnout for Trump and 40 percent for Biden, compared to 2016 totals.

One of the most insidious effects these grants can have is injecting structural bias into the local election administration process. This grossly distorts what used to be straightforward election administration statistics studied in the aftermath.

### **Did Any ZuckBuck Counties Flip Red/Blue?**

Yes. Tarrant County, the last urban red county in Texas, flipped in 2020 with Biden improving by 43% in raw votes over 2016 to Trump's 18%. Tarrant received \$1.6 million dollars. The Tarrant County Election Administrator's budget for the 2020 Election was originally \$8,089,517. CTCL juiced that budget by almost 21 percent. Biden also flipped Austin metro area Hays and Williamson Counties with raw vote improvements between 70 and 80 percent.

### **How Did the Grant Process Work?**

ZuckBucks weren't simply handed out to counties unprompted. According to county interviews performed by PILF, county **election administrators explained they were invited to apply for grants**—particularly if they were smaller in terms of population. The optics were better in making the operation look fairer and in the public interest by padding the grantees with small counties whose political loyalties were never in doubt. Nationally, the majority of grants went to jurisdictions with less than 25,000 residents. Once the CTCL and the county agreed to how the money would be spent and that it would not be used to supplant existing budget items, the cash came rolling in.

### **Is the Texas Legislature Doing Anything About Private Funding?**

Yes. Rep. Phil King of Weatherford (Parker County took \$54,072 from CTCL) filed HB 2283 to prohibit these kinds of practices going forward. The bill has sat in the House Elections Committee since March 15.

### **Overall...**

ZuckBucks affected roughly 74 percent of Texas residents by total population with grants given to 115 counties. If Texas' election was limited only to those counties receiving the private funds, Joe Biden would have bested Donald Trump by roughly 270,000 votes. In November 2020, Texas performed two kinds of elections. While the majority of counties (just 26% of state population) stuck to established/publicly budgeted procedures, the rest took Silicon Valley money in return for preferred administrative practices.

### **PILF President J. Christian Adams**

*“Private parties cannot be allowed to pay for preferred modes of elections in Texas or anywhere else. Election administration is the most fundamental function of local and state government and must be funded accordingly, full stop.”*

### **Sources**

*Texas Secretary of State Certified 2020 Election Results  
Center for Tech and Civic Life Grant Materials  
CTCL Grant Award Letters Provided/Published by Grantees*