

PUBLIC INTEREST

— LEGAL FOUNDATION —

28% of Florida ZuckBucks Lingered After the 2020 Election – Tainting Midterms

Grant Monies Flowed Back to Facebook Ad Sales

May 2021 – Flush with cash from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, the Center for Tech and Civil Life (CTCL) flooded key Florida county election offices with money to subsidize procedures preferred by the outside group. As states like Florida and others move to ban such practices going forward, an accounting of the grant records will detail how the entire operation worked before and after the 2020 Presidential Election. **Unlike other states, Florida records show a pattern of the late-arriving grants being shoved into digital media outreach campaigns, namely to the benefit of Facebook and Google ad sales departments.**

How Much Money Was Given and When?

Thanks to the Florida Sunshine Law, accounting for the funds was easier here than in other places in the country. **PILF totaled \$16.5 million accepted by 11 Florida county supervisors of elections before Election Day.**

Equally as interesting as county grant amounts were the dates in which the monies were offered. Florida cash came **very late** in the election cycle. Early voting started on October 19. This practically guaranteed leftover cash capable

<u>County</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Grant</u>	<u>Unspent</u>
Palm Beach	September 30	\$6,808,977.94	\$1,346,730.82
Hillsborough	September 21	\$2,932,375.00	--
Miami-Dade	October 15	\$2,482,440.00	\$2,482,440.00
Leon	September 28	\$1,437,386.00	\$664,599.64
Brevard	October 14	\$850,808.00	\$60,242.94
Broward	October 22	\$749,971.00	--
Alachua	September 21	\$707,606.00	\$203,908.57
Lake	September 30	\$195,900.00	--
Hernando	September 30	\$111,824.00	\$27,720.35
Osceola	October 7	\$109,404.00	--
Wakulla	September 16	\$69,564.00	\$2,811.50
TOTAL		\$16,456,255.00	\$4,643,509.58

of **affecting budget items ahead of the 2022 Midterms.**

What's the Deal with the Unspent Cash?

Unspent ZuckBucks are proving to be quite widespread among states accepting the grants. The grant letters detailing the cash award and instructions noted that recipients had until December 31, 2020, to expend all funds and give a report by January 31, 2021. On that date, subject counties were to report their activities with the monies and, if needed, ask for a six-month extension to dispose of any remainders. **The counties showing leftover cash now have until July 31 to report their activities**, if so authorized. During this extension period, Florida enacted a ban on private funding for election offices. Upon the signing of the new law, Miami-Dade officials pledged to return all unspent funds.

What Were Counties Promising to Do with the Money?

The quality of detail in grant applications between the Florida counties tends to vary. One element was clear: the more precise you were with goals and related dollar amount, the more likely you were to get what you asked for. Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections Wendy Link requested \$6.8 million—and got it. The CTCL did not give wide latitude on how to spend Zuckerberg’s money. There were pre-determined categories as they related to election administration tasks and expenses. Below are CTCL category names and totals.

CTCL Spending Category*	FL TOTALS
Non-Partisan Voter Education	\$6,471,798.22
Election Administration Equipment	\$1,997,673.87
Poll Worker Recruitment Funds, Hazard Pay, and/or Training Expenses	\$1,403,937.74
Temporary Staffing Support	\$605,708.95
Absentee Voting Equipment or Supplies	\$591,354.01
Ballot Dropboxes	\$318,744.69
Drive-Thru Voting	\$250,221.28
PPE for Staff, Poll Workers, or Voters	\$138,101.53
Polling Place Rental & Cleaning Expenses	\$26,745.04
Election Dept. Real Estate Costs/Satellite Office Costs	\$8,460.09
Voting Materials in Languages Other than English	--
###	\$11,812,745.42

Disclosed spending records show several Florida counties managed to zero-out their ZuckBuck balance by pushing the funds into public outreach campaigns. In detailed spending accounts disclosed to PILF, entries for **thousands of dollars went straight to Facebook advertising purchases. Palm Beach County promised to spend \$250,000 on digital ads with Facebook, Google, and YouTube if granted the money per its “Safe Voting Plan.”**

A 12th Florida county supervisor of elections not yet mentioned here also received ZuckBucks—but reversed the grant before the 2020 Election. **Escambia County** (Pensacola) “turned down the grant once we decided not to use the monies for the reason that they were not needed.”

Did This Money Influence the Outcome of the Election?

If Zuckerberg’s unspoken goal was to build expansive process efficiencies in some counties to tip the state for Vice President Joe Biden, the investments were a bust. Set aside the fact that some counties pocketed major chunks--if not all of the funds--well into 2021. Raw voter turnout demonstrates differences between 2020 and 2016. Keeping in mind that turnout was up nationally and Florida grew in population since 2016, there are notable trends. **Biden’s best turnout differential over 2016 was +33% in Lake County. President Donald Trump’s best was +60% in Miami-Dade. Biden’s was -1% in Miami.** Both candidates showed double-digit turnout improvement in nearly every county receiving grants.

No counties switched teams in the red vs. blue dynamic. Five red counties and seven blue counties received the cash.

The unspent funds are the core “influence” concern. Florida carries more cash into 2021 compared to Arizona, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Though new state law bans this locally, policymakers elsewhere should see the dangerous cycle of late-breaking grants advertised to help with one election, yet in practice extends into future contests.

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.** The JotForm online application asked few questions beyond necessary contact information. County supervisors of elections were asked if they were required to seek permission from a higher government authority to execute grant agreements. The CTCL also asked about Fiscal Year 2020 total budget details as of September 1. Using this baseline, PILF found that **local election budgets were juiced from a low 3% (Osceola) up to 40% (Palm Beach).**

PILF President J. Christian Adams

“Florida lawmakers were right to close the loophole in election law. Corporate-funded elections violate some of the most basic principles of election integrity. It’s the job of local governments to budget for and administer our voting processes. I commend Governor DeSantis and all involved in helping to make Florida a leader against this threat.”

Sources and Notes

Florida Secretary of State Certified 2020 Election Results

Center for Tech and Civic Life Grant Materials

CTCL Grant Award Letters Provided/Published by Grantees

Palm Beach County ‘Safe Voting Plan’ (September 29, 2021)

Fox News; [Florida Voting Law Signed by DeSantis...](#) (May 7, 2021)

**Lake and Osceola Counties slightly distort the spending totals due to their expenditures beyond the granted amounts. Both counties did manage to spend all CTCL funds but had to pay an additional combined total of \$144,941.60 to cover all expenses brought forth from the CTCL activities.*