

Groups with strong liberal ties funneled massive 2020 election grants to Democrat-rich districts

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By Susan Ferrechio - *The Washington Times* - Monday, April 18, 2022

Private donors led by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg pumped more than \$400 million into administering the 2020 presidential election, money that was often funneled by Democratic operatives into Democratic districts in what became essentially a get-out-the-vote effort for Joseph R. Biden.

The total amount of private donations for carrying out the 2020 election exceeded the federal government's entire allocation for election spending that year.

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission was responsible for administering the \$400 million in "election security grants" that Congress approved in 2020 to help local officials administer the election during a pandemic.

The private funds were distributed on an unprecedented scale to voting districts across the country by nonprofit groups staffed by former Democratic operatives who sought the help of left-leaning government officials.

These groups funneled much of the money to cities and counties rich in Democratic voters for purposes that appear less centered on voter safety and more focused on increasing turnout among certain groups.

The federal government, outspent by private donors, has no control over the money or the ability to track how it is spent.

“We don’t really have a comment on the private funding that’s been out there because we have no say in it,” Thomas Hicks, chairman of the four-member Election Assistance Commission, told The Washington Times. “It’s put out there, and we don’t have any accountability for it. When we distribute money, there’s a report that comes back, and we report that back to Congress. So we know where every dollar is being spent. But we don’t have the authority or the ability to track that private funding.”

The scheme would have outraged Democrats if the political tables were turned.

“Imagine if a conservative billionaire known for funding right-leaning causes gave \$400 million to a set of nonprofits founded by Republican Party operatives, and that money went more heavily to red counties than blue, in

the last presidential election,” said Hayden Ludwig, a senior investigative researcher at the Capital Research Center, a conservative watchdog group examining private election funding in 2020.

The billionaire who pumped \$400 million into the 2020 election was Mr. Zuckerberg, who gives frequently and generously to center-left causes. Additional funding sent to election offices, roughly \$25 million, came from anonymous donors.

Mr. Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, cited “the unprecedented challenges of Covid 19” when they donated \$328 million to the Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL) and \$69.5 million to the Center for Election Innovation and Research (CEIR). Both are nonprofit organizations.

The couple said the donations would “provide local and state officials across the country with the resources, training and infrastructure necessary to ensure that every voter who intends to cast a ballot is able to, and ultimately preserve the integrity of our elections.”

Although the two nonprofits are officially nonpartisan, they are staffed with former Democratic operatives who have dedicated their careers to liberal causes, including getting Democratic voters to the polls.

The CTCL is led by three people who recently provided digital training to Democratic organizers and worked to recruit thousands of liberal candidates to run for local office through the now-defunct New Organizing Institute.

Tiana Epps-Johnson, a former Obama Foundation fellow, and Whitney May and Donny Bridges also founded the CTCL. They operated out of the same Chicago address as their former organization, the New Organizing Institute, which dissolved in 2015.

The center operated with a budget of about \$3 million until it was suddenly infused with a staggering \$350 million in the second half of 2020, most of it from Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Chan.

The CTCL was tasked with delivering the money via grants to election offices nationwide.

The second group funded by Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Chan, CEIR, is run by David Becker, a former Justice Department lawyer in the civil rights division who helped enforce the Voting Rights Act.

Mr. Becker previously worked on elections and voting issues for the Pew Charitable Trusts, a center-left philanthropy. He also led litigation efforts against Republican-led states over voter ID laws and redistricting for the liberal People for the American Way.

The CTCL partnered with the Center for Secure and Modern Elections, The Voter Project, the National Vote at Home Institute, The Elections Group and other left-leaning organizations to help distribute and administer the massive sum from the Zuckerbergs and other donors to key election offices.

The associated groups were staffed with liberal operatives who had worked to help elect Democratic candidates or pushed liberal causes such as automatic voter registration and mail-in voting. Analysts determined that such programs boosted Democratic votes in 2020.

These outside groups reached out to politically friendly government officials who played prominent roles in distributing the grants in Democratic-leaning districts. Critics said it became a massive and partisan get-out-the-vote effort for mail-in and absentee voting.

“They are Democratic Party operatives, even if they are not paid by the DNC,” said Bill Doyle, an economist and principal researcher at the Caesar Rodney Election Institute in Irving, Texas. “I don’t know how you can look at their resumes and conclude that these people are nonpartisan ‘techie’ or disinterested get-out-the-vote people. That just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

After months of backlash from Republican lawmakers, conservative groups and other critics of the private funding scheme, Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Chan announced last week that they would no longer provide donations to fund election operations. Several states have moved to ban “Zuckbucks.”

Brian Baker, a spokesman for Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Chan, defended the donations. He pointed out that the money was distributed to 2,500 municipalities and anyone who sought a grant received one.

An analysis by conservative-leaning research groups found that Biden-heavy districts received far more money than municipalities favoring Donald Trump.

The Capital Research Center found that Georgia counties won by Mr. Trump averaged \$1.41 per capita in private grant funding while counties won by Mr. Biden averaged \$5.33 per capita — nearly four times as much.

Private funding in Pennsylvania provided \$0.60 per person in Trump counties compared with \$2.85 per person in Biden-won counties.

In Wisconsin, a swing state that helped tip the election to Mr. Biden, lawsuits and public records requests have yielded a trove of emails and other communications that show how extensively the CTCL and associated groups infiltrated local election offices.

Green Bay received an initial \$1.09 million from the CTCL. Outside groups affiliated with the center embedded operatives in election offices and pushed to access voter information, absentee ballot design, placement of drop boxes, ballot “curing” and other election administration activities normally limited to city staff, according to a report produced by Wisconsin special counsel Michael Gableman at the behest of state Republican lawmakers.

The center used Vicky Selkove, manager of strategic initiatives and community partnerships for the city of Racine, as a point person to invite four other major cities in Wisconsin — Milwaukee, Green Bay, Madison and Kenosha — to apply for the Zuckerberg grants. The grants came with conditions mandating how the money would be spent.

Ms. Selkove played an instrumental role in enlisting all five cities to accept massive and conditional grants from CTCL.

Her social media posts show a significant partisan interest in the election. She advocated publicly and passionately for the defeat of President Trump. She enthusiastically backed Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren before throwing her support behind the Biden-Harris ticket.

In February 2020, she tweeted, “Who would best be able to completely demolish Trump?”

She later tweeted, “My rage for all who voted for Trump is boundless.”

Ms. Selkove regularly amended her Twitter posts with the hashtags #StopTrump, #JoeBidenForPresident, #VoteBlueToEndTheNightmare, #VoteBlue and #FliptheVote.

Ms. Seklowe coordinated the development of a “safe voting plan” for the five Wisconsin cities at the request of CTCL. It called for “conducting the necessary voter outreach and education to promote absentee voting and encourage higher percentages of our electors to vote absentee.”

Officials in the five cities committed to “be intentional and strategic in reaching our historically disenfranchised residents and communities, and above all, ensure the right to vote in our dense and diverse communities.”

The cities are the most populated areas of the state and solid blue voting districts where bolstering Democratic turnout would add thousands of votes to Mr. Biden’s tally in Wisconsin. Mr. Biden won the state by fewer than 12,000 votes.

Green Bay spent some of the grant money on “bilingual vote navigators,” who provided unprecedented, concierge-level service to help certain groups of voters “properly upload valid voter IDs, complete their ballots, comply with certification requirements, and offer witness signatures.” The same “vote navigators,” the plan stipulated, would then be trained and used as “election inspectors.”

The CTCL enlisted the help of the National Vote at Home Institute, which advocates for implementing a vote-by-mail system, a long-held goal of the Democratic Party.

The organization identifies as nonpartisan but partners with left-leaning groups, including Common Cause and Democracy Fund.

Voting by mail has long been viewed as an advantage for Democrats, although some say the data is inconclusive.

Tom Bonier, an analyst with the Democratic market research firm TargetSmart in Washington, told The Guardian in December 2020 that the increase in mail-in ballots in the presidential election was “crucially and critically important to Biden’s win.” He concluded, “There’s absolutely no way we would have hit these record levels of voter turnout, nationally, without this massive adoption of mail voting.”

Michael Spitzer-Rubenstein helped facilitate those results as the “Wisconsin lead” for the National Vote at Home Institute.

He is a former Democratic strategist who worked as a field organizer for Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign and went on to advise the campaigns of other Democrats, including Charles B. Rangel of New York.

As a grant adviser in Green Bay, Mr. Spitzer-Rubenstein embedded with government officials to administer CTCL’s \$1.09 million grant to the city’s election office. His demands to city officials, including an attempt to help “cure” rejected ballots that were returned with missing information, led to a battle with Green Bay City Clerk Kris Teske.

Ms. Teske resigned in December 2020 after complaining that Mr. Spitzer-Rubenstein improperly infiltrated the election administration office.

"I am not comfortable having him in the office," Ms. Teske wrote to a supervisor in August, court records show. "People are saying they are a partisan group, we don't think it looks good."

Mr. Spitzer-Rubenstein also sought to help the outside groups embed with election officials in Milwaukee, a heavily Democratic city that received a \$2.15 million CTCL grant.

Mr. Spitzer-Rubenstein, according to emails, sought to obtain reams of data on Milwaukee's absentee ballots, including ballot return data, the number of returned ballots per ward, the number of outstanding ballots per ward and the number of ballots "rejected/returned to be cured."

Milwaukee officials rejected some of Mr. Spitzer-Rubenstein's demands on the basis of database security issues.

The Elections Group, a for-profit organization, served as a "technical partner" for the CTCL in Wisconsin. It helped add satellite voting locations and drop boxes and helped train election officials in the five cities that received the most CTCL funding. The group listed left-leaning organizations as partners in an online posting but has since taken down the page.

The Biden-Harris campaign team cited The Elections Group as a key independent organization "providing critical assistance and advice to local officials confronting the difficulties of administering an election in a pandemic."

Ryan Chew, the Wisconsin “state lead” for The Elections Group, sent an upbeat email to Milwaukee Election Commission Executive Director Claire Woodall-Vogg on Nov. 4, a day after the election, as many cities and counties were still counting votes.

Milwaukee’s count concluded early on Nov. 4, and the heavily Democratic city delivered a landslide win for Mr. Biden.

Mr. Biden beat Mr. Trump by 194,661 votes to 48,414 votes. The city registered a nearly 79% turnout, more than 3% over 2016. Mr. Biden’s win exceeded Hillary Clinton’s 2016 victory in Milwaukee by 6,000 votes, a critical increase that helped bolster the state’s tally for Mr. Biden.

“Damn Claire, you have a flair for drama,” Mr. Chew wrote to Ms. Woodall-Vogg. “Delivering just the margin needed at 3 a.m. I bet you had those votes counted at midnight, and just wanted to keep the world waiting.”

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Biden's bumbling puts spotlight on abundance of elderly politicians running Washington

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Washington's leaders are old, and voters are beginning to notice.

President Biden's apparent cognitive decline, happening right before the nation's eyes as he shuffles along, struggles to read teleprompters and regularly makes gaffes or utters incoherent sentences, has drawn scrutiny to Washington's cadre of aging lawmakers.

A poll found that 64% of registered Democratic voters don't want Mr. Biden to run for office again, and a significant number say he's too old.

"A third of them volunteered it was because of Biden's age," Steve Greenberg of the Siena College Research Institute, which conducted the poll, told The Washington Times. "That was a fill-in-the-blank. That was not a choice."

A whopping 60% of Democrats 65 and older and a third of all those 30 to 64 cited age as the reason Mr. Biden should not run again. Among voters 29 and younger, 14% cited the president's age.

At 79, Mr. Biden, the oldest person ever elected to the White House, is hardly the most elderly political leader in the nation's capital.

In fact, he is younger than many leading members of Congress.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, California Democrat, is 82. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, is 80. The Senate president pro tempore, Patrick J. Leahy, is 82. The Vermont Democrat is third in line for the presidency.

Sen. Richard C. Shelby of Alabama, the ranking member of the powerful Appropriations Committee and a key negotiator on all major spending deals, is 88.

Overall, a third of U.S. senators and 20% of House members are older than 70.

Some are planning to retire. Mr. Leahy, chairman of the Appropriations Committee, has been absent from the Senate after breaking his hip last month.

Sen. James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma, 87, the ranking member on the Senate Armed Services Committee, is also retiring.

Democrats are assuming Sen. Dianne Feinstein, 89, won't seek reelection after public concerns about a cognitive decline. The California Democrat hasn't announced her plans. With Mr. Leahy leaving, she would succeed him to become third in line for the presidency if the party retains the Senate majority after the November elections.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican, is running for an eighth Senate term at age 88. If he wins, Mr. Grassley will be 95 at the end of his ninth term.

Iowa voters are not particularly concerned about his age, Republican strategist and Grassley biographer Eric Woolson said in an interview.

"I think they are comfortable with his stamina," said Mr. Woolson, a former Grassley spokesman.

Mr. Grassley visits all 99 Iowa counties every year and is known for his 4 a.m. jogs six days a week.

"I think he's done quite a bit, especially in the last eight to 10 years, to mitigate the age issue, and he's certainly as sharp as he has ever been throughout his career. So I think he may be the exception to the rule in terms of voters," Mr. Woolson said.

Mr. Grassley's Democratic opponent is Mike Franken, a retired Navy admiral who is 64.

A poll conducted last week for the Franken campaign found Mr. Grassley leading by only 5 percentage points. His advantage shrank to a single point when voters in the poll were presented with each candidate's biographical statements, including information about Mr. Grassley's entry into elected politics in 1959, two years after Mr. Franken was born.

In the House, younger Democratic lawmakers have been increasingly impatient about moving into leadership positions held for decades by a team of now-octogenarians.

"The internal dynamics of the House has made it such that there is very little option for succession," Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, 32, a member of the "Squad" of newcomer liberal Democrats, told The Intercept in 2020.

Mrs. Pelosi, Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland, 83, and Majority Whip James E. Clyburn of South Carolina, 81, have no official plans to step aside in the next Congress.

"We have to be very, very careful," Mr. Clyburn, who has been a member of the Democratic leadership team since 2003, told The Washington Post this year. "There has to be a healthy balance of strength and experience."

Mrs. Pelosi, who is serving her fourth term as speaker, pledged privately to her caucus four years ago that she would not run for Democratic leader again after this year.

Still, she announced in January that she would seek a 19th term representing her San Francisco district in Congress, renewing questions about her leadership plans.

Asked whether she would run for speaker in January if Democrats maintain the House majority, Mrs. Pelosi would not commit to stepping aside.

"That's not a question," Mrs. Pelosi told ABC News in February. "My purpose right now is just to win that election. Nothing less is at stake than our democracy."

A Morning Consult/Politico poll taken shortly after Mrs. Pelosi's reelection announcement found less than half of Democratic voters wanted her to remain the leader of the party in the House.

If Mrs. Pelosi and her top deputies move aside, lawmakers decades younger are waiting in the wings for leadership positions.

The list includes Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of New York, 51, now the Democratic Caucus chair, Pramila Jayapal of Washington, 56, chair of the House Progressive Caucus, Pete Aguilar of California, 43, Democratic Caucus vice chair, and Rep. Jamie Raskin of Maryland, 59.

The Senate and House have long histories of lawmakers growing old in office.

Sen. Strom Thurmond remained on the job until he was 100, but he declined physically and cognitively in his final years.

Sen. Thad Cochran, Mississippi Republican, struggled in his old age to run the Senate Appropriations Committee before resigning in 2018 at age 80 after four decades in Congress.

Other lawmakers stay in office until they die.

This year, Reps. Don Young, Alaska Republican, died at 88. Florida's Alcee Hastings, Florida Democrat, died of cancer last year at 84 after an extended absence from the House.

Dr. Michael T. Ullman, a professor in the Department of Neuroscience and director of Georgetown University Medical Center's Brain and Language Lab, said older politicians can have advantages.

"Some aspects of cognition decline with age, some remain stable and some improve," Dr. Ullman said. "So it's not all downhill."

Dr. Ullman said older people tend to be more knowledgeable and have more self-control and better self-regulation, though the speed of processing information and some ability to recall information decline.

"I think someone who's younger, who might be impulsive and make wrong decisions, that's probably a lot more dangerous than someone who's a little bit slower and making good decisions," Dr. Ullman said.

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Bitter enemies Trump, McConnell notched Supreme Court abortion win with their unlikely alliance

By Susan Ferrechio - *The Washington Times* - Wednesday, June 29, 2022

They've never been good friends — and now appear to be political enemies. But the odd partnership between Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell nevertheless gave conservatives their biggest Supreme Court win in a generation.

The justices' 5-4 decision overturning Roe v. Wade achieved one of the highest goals of the conservative movement: sending the authority to decide abortion law back to the states.

It was made possible chiefly because of actions taken by both Mr. McConnell, 80, the Senate Republican leader who controlled the consideration of judicial nominees while his party was in the majority, and Mr. Trump, 76, who defied steep odds to become the Republican nominee and ultimately the winner of the 2016 presidential election, clearing the way for him to nominate justices from a list of conservative judges compiled while he was a candidate.

"Each gets substantial credit for the role they played," said Josh Blackman, a constitutional law professor at South Texas College of Law Houston. "But one could not have done it without the other."

The two succeeded despite a consistently rocky relationship.

Six years ago, Mr. McConnell tried to block Mr. Trump from becoming president. He actively worked against the businessman and reality TV star's effort to become the Republican nominee.

At one point in 2016, Mr. McConnell promised fellow Republicans that they would drop Mr. Trump "like a hot rock" if he made it onto the ballot and endangered down-ballot party members running for reelection to the Senate.

Mr. Trump has regularly taken jabs at Mr. McConnell. He has criticized the Kentuckian's leadership of Senate Republicans and nicknamed him "Broken Old Crow."

Most recently, Mr. Trump warned on his Truth Social media site that Mr. McConnell's push for bipartisan gun control legislation "will be the final straw" and "the first step in taking away your guns."

Despite their mutual distaste for each other, the two forged a fragile partnership during Mr. Trump's four years in the White House. They worked together to fill more than 200 vacancies on the federal courts and, most important, three open seats on the Supreme Court, with conservative jurists.

“Politics makes strange bedfellows,” said Ford O’Connell, a Republican running for the Florida Legislature. “For them to get three Supreme Court justices through the Senate required a lot of trust. Trump placed a lot of trust in McConnell because of the arcane rules of the United States Senate, and he felt that McConnell was the best one to navigate those land mines.”

The alliance barely lasted the four years of Mr. Trump’s presidency and fell apart on Jan. 6, 2021, when pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol and disrupted the joint session of Congress that was certifying the 2020 presidential election results.

Although Mr. McConnell did not vote to convict the president on a House impeachment charge of inciting the riot, he eviscerated Mr. Trump in a Senate floor speech while blaming him for the chaos and violence.

“There is no question that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of that day,” Mr. McConnell said on Feb. 13, 2021.

Mr. McConnell said Mr. Trump ended his political career because of his actions on Jan. 6, and Mr. McConnell seemed happy about it, according to the book “This Will Not Pass,” by New York Times reporters Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns.

“He put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger,” Mr. McConnell reportedly said. “Couldn’t have happened at a better time.”

Yet for the previous four years, Mr. Trump and Mr. McConnell took actions that worked in tandem to convert the Supreme Court from a 5-4 majority of Democratic appointees to the 6-3 Republican-appointed court that has

delivered a series of landmark rulings, including the reversal of the 1973 abortion decision.

Among the key steps that made the ruling a reality was Mr. McConnell's announcement, hours after the death of conservative Justice Antonin Scalia, that he would not hold a Senate vote to fill the vacancy until after the 2016 election. That deprived the Senate of an opportunity to confirm President Obama's nominee, Merrick Garland, who is now President Biden's attorney general.

Mr. Trump's unexpected victory paved the way for Republicans to later confirm Justice Neil M. Gorsuch, who was among the five on the court who voted to overturn Roe last week.

Mr. Gorsuch was on a list of conservative judges whom Mr. Trump, as a candidate, pledged to choose to fill a Supreme Court vacancy, and it helped him win the evangelical vote.

After Mr. Trump appointed Justice Gorsuch, Mr. McConnell moved to end the filibuster on high court nominees, which prevented Democrats from what likely would have been a filibuster of the Gorsuch nomination and the two Trump-nominated justices who followed.

The Trump administration is credited with persuading Justice Anthony M. Kennedy to retire, giving Republicans a chance to preserve a Republican-nominated seat and confirm a second high court justice.

When Senate Democrats tried to thwart the confirmation of Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh with a litany of unproven sexual assault claims and televised hearings featuring an accuser, Mr. McConnell, along with then-Judiciary

Committee Chairman Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican, refused to waver on their support of the nominee. They helped ensure Mr. Trump's continued support and ultimately Justice Kavanaugh's narrow confirmation.

"If they had wavered at all, the Kavanaugh nomination would have certainly failed," said Mike Davis, the Senate Republicans' staff leader for Justice Kavanaugh's confirmation. "McConnell and Grassley pulled a rabbit out of a hat to get Kavanaugh's confirmation over the finish line."

Mr. McConnell also ushered through the nomination of Mr. Trump's third nominee, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, who was confirmed to the court eight days before the November 2020 election after the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Mr. Trump took credit for the court's ruling last week on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe*. After all, he nominated three of the five justices in the majority decision.

The Supreme Court also ruled last week to expand an individual's right to carry a gun. It was a major victory for Second Amendment advocates.

Those high court decisions, Mr. Trump said, "were only made possible because I delivered everything as promised, including nominating and getting three highly respected and strong Constitutionals confirmed to the United States Supreme Court."

Mr. McConnell has said reshaping the judiciary has been "the single most important accomplishment of my career," but he hardly ever mentions Mr. Trump as part of that success story.

During a speech Monday before the Rotary Club in Florence, Kentucky, Mr. McConnell dodged a complimentary comparison between Mr. Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who, like Mr. Trump, was a television star before winning the presidency. Mr. Zelenskyy is now months into battling a Russian invasion of his country.

“People were wondering what this guy’s going to be like,” Mr. McConnell said about Mr. Zelenskyy’s unusual rise to power. “I could have told them, ‘We had an actor in the White House, and it worked out very well — when Ronald Reagan was president.’ You never can tell about these showbiz people.”

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