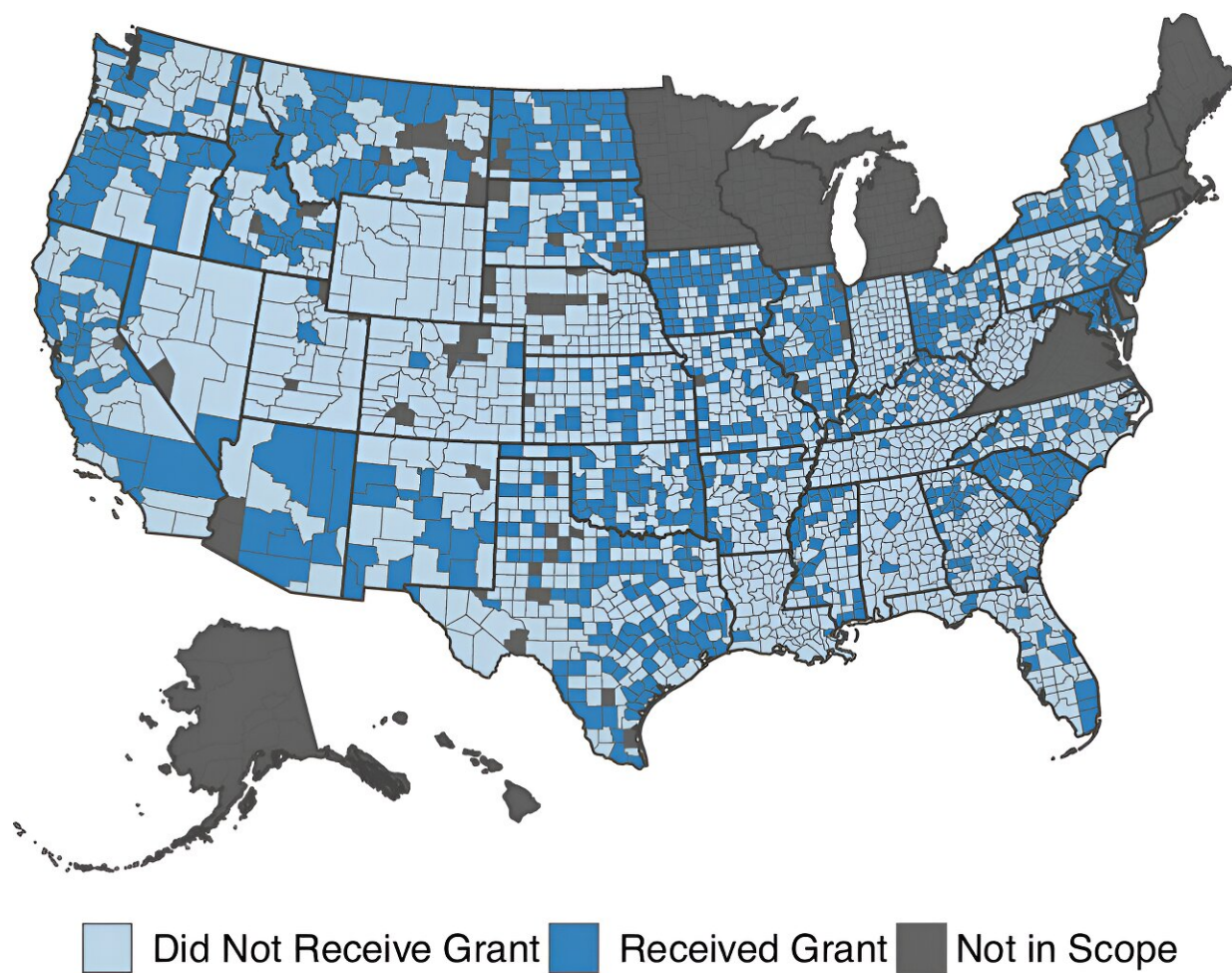


Study shows COVID-related private funding had little effect in 2020 presidential election

May 21 2024, by Jonathan Riggs



Geographic distribution of grants. Credit: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2024). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2317563121

Joe Biden was not substantially advantaged in the 2020 presidential election by COVID-related private funding, according to a new study co-authored by Daniel Thompson, UCLA assistant professor of political science.

Published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, [the study](#) rebuts longtime arguments made by conservative leadership that these grants swayed the election outcome.

"We can confidently say that the funding did not substantially improve the performance of Democratic candidates," Thompson said. "There was at least some reason to wonder because Democratic counties were substantially more likely to apply for these grants, but it had such a small effect on turnout that it didn't noticeably affect the outcome."

To conduct their study, Thompson and co-author Apoorva Lal, then a doctoral candidate at Stanford University and now a data scientist, analyzed administrative data from counties that obtained these grants and compared them to those without funding but with similar previous turnout and voting trends—using new advancements in statistical methods.

"Many reforms have sought to limit the influence of money in politics by changing who can spend how much money on which races," the authors wrote. "While many public officials and members of the public are concerned that donations to support local election administration offer a new, previously untapped way to influence [election results](#) without giving directly to candidates, our results suggest this may not be a substantial risk."

At the heart of the debate are so-called "Zuckerbucks"—more than \$400 million in grants given by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan—which were meant to cover COVID-related polling

site accommodations across the country in the face of inadequate Congressional and [state funding](#).

Although the couple's donations were made to two nonpartisan institutions (the Center for Election Innovation & Research and the Center for Tech and Civic Life) and the grants ultimately paid for accommodations such as Plexiglass dividers, additional poll workers and more counting machines to handle the influx of mailed-in ballots, controversy has only increased.

As the issue has grown more heated across the nation—former President Donald Trump notably called Zuckerberg a "criminal" in a 2021 email to his supporters—28 states thus far have banned private funding for election administration.

These developments have more to do with [partisan politics](#) than an evidence-based, unbiased response, according to the authors, who caution citizens and lawmakers alike to frame these vital issues in a more scientifically rigorous way—especially as the 2024 [presidential election](#) looms.

"While there are important values questions as to how we should set policies around elections administration, how they shape election results shouldn't be the first thing we're concerned about," Thompson said.

"When credible research designs are brought to the data, we find that many of the strong claims about one party or the other benefiting from election administration are overblown."

More information: Apoorva Lal et al, Did private election administration funding advantage Democrats in 2020?, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2024). [DOI:](#)

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