

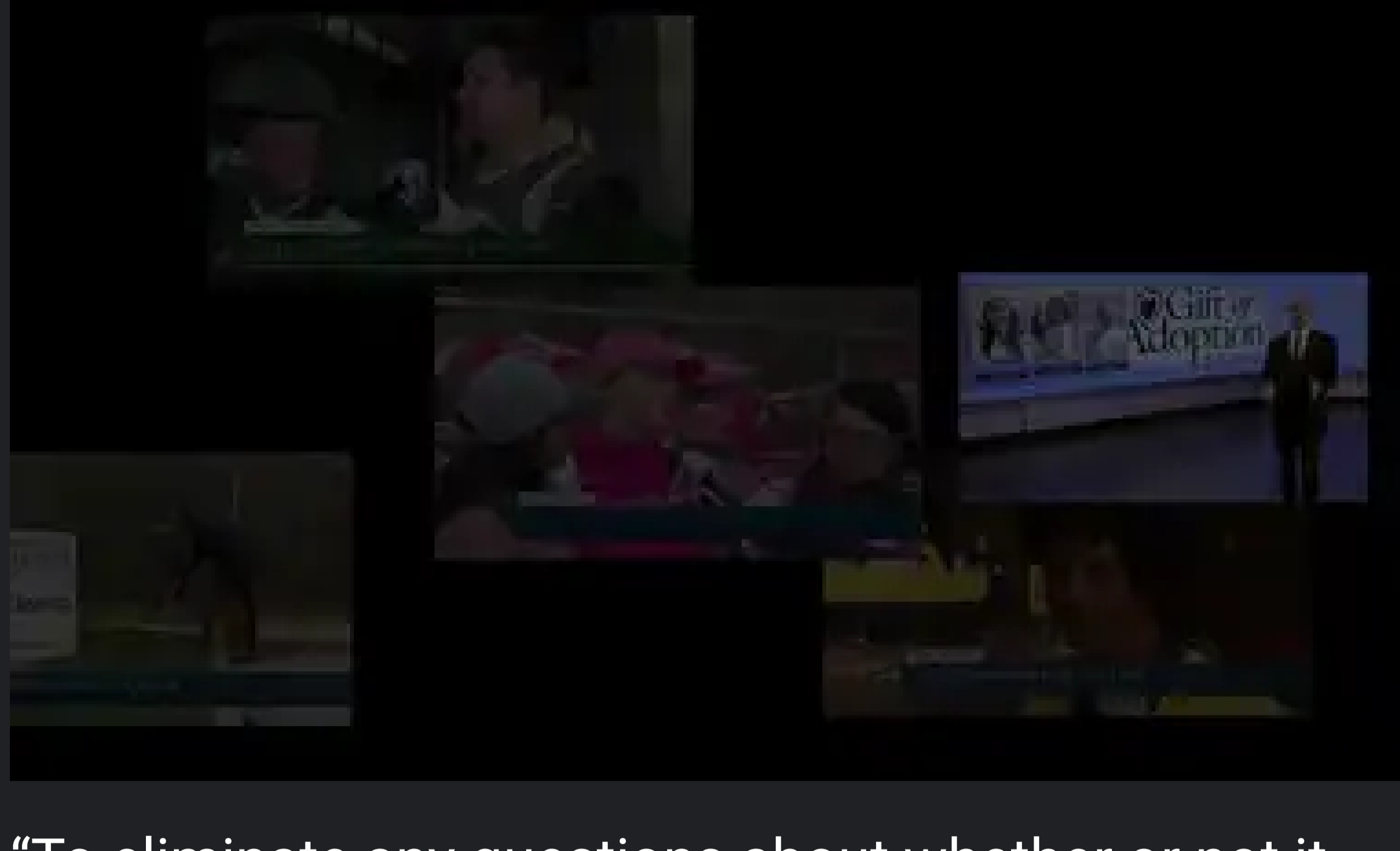
Madison official says city spent elections grants weeks before voters banned them



MADISON, Wisconsin — Wisconsin voters on Tuesday passed a constitutional amendment to ban [private funding for elections](#).

Just weeks earlier, the city of Madison used most of the nearly \$1.5 million in private grant money at its disposal to purchase a new machine to process absentee ballots, according to Mike Haas, the city's attorney.

Haas, who is also the former head of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, said the proposed constitutional amendments on Tuesday's ballot were a factor in deciding to use up the money.



"To eliminate any questions about whether or not it could be spent in that way, the city made sure that the funds were spent before the election," he said in an interview on Wednesday.



Mike Haas, Attorney for the City of Madison.

The money came from the same organization that prompted Republican state lawmakers to push for private election funding to be outlawed. The Chicago-based Center for Tech and Civic Life in 2020 distributed more than \$350 million in grants funded by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to help local election offices deal with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conservatives alleged that the grants were used as bribes to tip the 2020 presidential election in favor of President Joe Biden. There is no evidence to support that claim, and multiple courts have upheld that the grants were legal in Wisconsin.

Republican state Sen. Eric Wimberger, of Green Bay, authored the proposed constitutional amendments and celebrated their passage in a statement Tuesday.

"Whether there is actual election tampering or not, an impression of an injustice is as detrimental to society as an actual injustice," he said. "People need policies and procedures that instill confidence in the vote result, even if they don't like the result."

In total, more than 200 Wisconsin election offices received roughly \$10 million in grants in 2020. The state's five largest cities received a vast majority of the funds – about \$8.5 million. Those cities are typically Democratic strongholds.

Election officials used the money for everything from hiring additional staff to purchasing voting machines and more absentee ballots to deal with an influx of requests.

Despite controversy over the grants, CTCL launched the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence in 2022, selecting Madison as one of the 10 initial members. As part of the program, the city's elections officials received \$500,000 in 2023 and \$1 million in 2024.

Haas said "almost all" of the grant money went towards the new high-speed absentee ballot processing machine that was purchased in the past month. The machine will pack and sort absentee ballot envelopes, as well as receive completed ballots when they are returned. According to Haas, the city currently spends more than \$100,000 in every major election to hire temporary election workers to handle absentee ballots.

Elections administration also relies on the efforts of a multitude of outside workers, including IT support, transportation, and voting machine technicians. Election experts worry that the second constitutional amendment passed by voters on Tuesday, which says that only "election officials designated by law" can perform election-related tasks, may make that assistance illegal.

"That has the potential to really create a mess for election officials because of the vague wording," Haas said.

Election officials are looking to the Wisconsin Elections Commission or the courts to clarify what that amendment will mean for them.

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