

Eric Lee

Dr. Nissa Cannon

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## In Full Swing: Pro-Biden Super PACs Strategies in 2020

### **Introduction**

The 2020 presidential election was the most expensive since the nation's inception, with candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden spending \$0.779 billion and \$1.044 billion on their respective campaigns (OpenSecrets). However, while the \$1.822 billion spent between these rival campaigns is unprecedented, its financial impact on the election was dwarfed by the \$2.128 billion in expenditures from interest groups—with this disparity in financial influence enabled by super PACs (OpenSecrets). Driven to secure favorable policy outcomes, these interest groups use elected officials as proxies: they fund candidates with aligned interests to help them secure office, ensuring that those interests are advocated for within the legislative process. To blunt the influence of such organized interests, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) enforces limits on the amount that corporations are allowed to directly contribute to a given campaign (FEC 2021). However, the landmark decision in the 2010 *Citizens United v. FEC* case disallows limits on interest groups' election spending if the expenditures are neither direct contributions nor made in coordination with the beneficiary (FEC 2010). Since then, interest groups have leveraged this landmark ruling to maximize their financial influence in elections by funneling their money into super political action committees (super PACs): “political [organizations] eligible to receive and spend unlimited sums...on independent campaigning in support of and in opposition to candidates for federal office” (Kang 1903).

Given these developments, super PACs were widely studied in their 2012 electoral debut,

from which scholars concur that super PACs employ a variety of strategies pivotal in determining election outcomes. In subsequent years, scholars have also acknowledged that super PACs are a relatively new political tool that evolve in function with each election cycle. The 2020 presidential election exemplifies these observations, with unparalleled levels of super PAC spending on both sides of a particularly contentious electoral clash. Despite this, there is not yet scholarship regarding the roles that super PACs played in Biden's 2020 electoral victory, due to the election's recency. Thus, given the changing nature of super PACs and their substantial pecuniary influence, this gap in knowledge begs the question: what strategies did super PACs employ to secure an electoral victory for Biden in 2020?

This paper posits that pro-Biden super PACs focused on using ads and media to win over voters in closely contested states known as "swing states," as revealed by an analysis of super PAC ads and their correspondent expenditures. Specifically, I contend that this approach was effectuated through two strategies, both of which evolved from strategies scholars identified in the 2012 election: a candidate-specific strategy and a partisan support strategy. First, pro-Biden super PACs allocated the majority of their expenditures toward launching pro-Biden ads in swing states, employing targeted rhetorical strategies to appeal to decisive voters. Second, super PACs representing separate interests allied to establish a partisan support network, simultaneously promoting Biden with Congressional Democratic candidates in swing states to maximize voter turnout and induce straight-ticket voting.

### **Candidate-Specific Strategy**

In scholarship analyzing the 2012 presidential election, scholars identified that super PACs pursued a candidate-specific approach. Emory law professor Michael S. Kang expounds the concept of "candidate-specific spending," explaining how super PACs attack and defend

individual candidates because they are naturally suited to do so: offensively, super PACs can “attack [favored] candidates’ opponent[s]” without fear of “public blowback,” and defensively, they can spend indefinitely “in focused advocacy for their candidates at the national level” (Kang 1920, 1922). Political science professors Dino P. Christenson and Corwin D. Smidt affirm Kang’s findings, emphasizing the ad rem prevalence of candidate-specific spending for primary elections and national elections alike. At the primary level, Christenson and Smidt find that Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum—the frontrunners in the 2012 Republican primary—each had super PACs specifically targeting or aiding their campaigns (Christenson and Smidt 422). Beyond the primary stage, Christenson and Smidt further reveal that super PACs offensively spent \$12.2 million directly against Romney’s campaign, while investigative journalists Michael Beckel and Russ Choma uncovered that the Obama campaign endured \$55.0 million worth of negative advertising (Christenson and Smidt 422; Beckel and Choma). Kang corroborates this point, underscoring that these candidate-specific super PACs defensively “spent seven- and eight-figure sums” to keep their respective campaigns afloat (Kang 1917).

Though identified by scholars in 2012, this candidate-specific strategy remains prevalent for pro-Biden super PACs in 2020, as revealed by their record-breaking spending—both offensively and defensively—in support of Biden. As designated by OpenSecrets, a joint campaign finance research initiative between the Center for Responsive Politics and the National Institute on Money in Politics, “single-candidate super PACs” are formed to “focus almost exclusively on one candidate” and are thus inherently candidate-specific in their spending (OpenSecrets). In 2020, OpenSecrets expenditure data reveals that single-candidate super PACs made significant contributions, with 89 single-candidate super PACs contributing more than \$10,000 toward electing Biden, including 17 super PACs that spent over \$5 million. To put these

figures into perspective, the sum of these top 17 single-candidate expenditures totals \$563.4 million, equalling 31.53% of all Democratic super PAC expenditures (OpenSecrets). Though pro-Biden expenditures do not account for a majority of Democratic expenditures, this 31.53% statistic is still notably significant, for two reasons.

First, the aggregate sum of Democratic super PAC expenditures provided by OpenSecrets encompasses the large amount of super PAC spending on Congressional elections, which featured races for 35 Senate seats and 435 House seats (Ballotpedia). Such a figure includes hundreds of millions of dollars in spending unrelated to the presidential race, by liberal super PACs such as the Senate Majority PAC (\$230,406,668), the House Majority PAC (\$138,867,515), and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (\$91,241,880) (OpenSecrets). Thus, for super PAC expenditures specifically supporting Biden—a single candidate among hundreds throughout 471 Congressional elections—to account for nearly one third of all liberal super PAC expenditures, pro-Biden candidate-specific spending must have been a prominent super PAC strategy. Second, the methodology used by OpenSecrets to classify super PACs as “single-candidate” is limited by aggregate expenditure data that fails to account for shifts in super PAC behavior, underrepresenting pro-Biden spending. Many liberal super PACs shifted their support in favor of Biden after his victory in the Democratic primary, and though their post-primary expenditures were dedicated to Biden, they are not categorized as candidate-specific within OpenSecrets due to the pre-primary money spent on other candidates (Quinn). For instance, the Dream Defenders Fight PAC initially supported Bernie Sanders with \$69,007 in expenditures, but later endorsed Biden via Twitter and spent \$73,255 in support of his campaign; despite only donating to Biden following Sanders’ concession from the primary, the PAC’s expenditures are not counted as candidate-specific (Dream Defenders). Therefore, the

scale and prevalence of pro-Biden expenditures in 2020 must be higher than what the 31.53% figure purports.

Moreover, within this candidate-specific strategy, expenditure data and media research reveal that pro-Biden super PAC spending was primarily dedicated toward political ads. The top five candidate-specific pro-Biden super PACs spent an average of 92.84% of their total expenditures on ads and media, encompassing nearly half a billion dollars in spending: Future Forward USA (\$144,191,526), Priorities USA Action PAC (\$115,749,883), American Bridge 21st Century (\$85,463,766), Independence USA PAC (\$59,321,859), and Unite the Country (\$49,938,340) (OpenSecrets). Moreover, more than half of the top ten recipients of spending from both Future Forward USA and Priorities USA Action were advertising companies, such as Facebook Inc., Google Inc., and MVAR Media (OpenSecrets). With such a high percentage of super PAC expenditures dedicated to ads, media was clearly a strategic priority for pro-Biden super PACs. Further, professors Ridout, Fowler, and Franz corroborate this conclusion by underscoring the unprecedented prevalence of political ads in 2020 as compared to previous years. These scholars found that the increased super PAC media spending led to a record high number of 2.35 million television ads for the 2020 presidential election cycle, as compared to 1.03 million ads and 1.43 million ads in 2016 and 2012 respectively (Ridout et al. 467). Similarly, political digital ads via social media platforms like Facebook and Google also peaked in 2020, with exact statistics indeterminate due to unreleased ad data, but projections “suggest[ing] considerable growth in digital advertising” in comparison to prior presidential elections (Ridout et al. 475). Such unsurpassed levels of super PAC media spending and resultant advertising therefore establish ads as the primary focus of pro-Biden super PACs.

Furthermore, the geographical distribution and focus of pro-Biden advertising underscores that super PACs targeted swing states in their media strategies. In 2020, the six most pivotal battleground states were Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Florida; other less crucial but still closely contested swing states include Texas, Georgia, Iowa, and Nevada (Gilbert). Throughout the election season, pro-Biden super PACs almost exclusively targeted swing states, as seen in the three following examples. First, Unite the Country, the fifth largest candidate-specific Biden super PAC, launched a positive ad campaign in May 2020 in Wisconsin—a critical swing state which Biden eventually won by a fraction of a percent (Wagner). Second, Priorities USA Action—Biden’s flagship super PAC—bought “\$17 million worth of digital ads in key battleground states including Arizona, Florida, Michigan, and Pennsylvania” from mid-summer 2020 until Election Day (Roarty). Third, the \$144.2 million spent on media by Future Forward USA was directed toward “television ad buys...in key states [like] Texas, Pennsylvania, and Michigan” to garner votes near the end of the election season (Greenberg). Beyond individual super PACs, pro-Biden ads appeared more frequently than pro-Trump ads in every daypart of the most important markets in eight major swing states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (Passwaiter). Overall, the consistent choice of advertising locations by pro-Biden super PACs clearly reveals their focus on advertising in swing states to clinch the election.

Within this established focus on swing states, pro-Biden super PACs were incentivized to construct their ads to appeal specifically to swing state voters in an attempt to spark voter engagement and increase turnout. The prevalence of political ads as a campaign strategy is explained by political science Ted Brader in his widely cited paper, “Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions,” where he

asserts that the use of “image and music to evoke emotions” in political ads can “change the way citizens get involved [in elections]” (Brader 388). Specifically, through two experiments measuring how a political ad’s evocation of emotion affects citizens’ inclination to vote for or against a given candidate, Brader concludes that when content and presentation in political ads spur an empathetic response, “emotion [can have] a positive impact on getting people involved” and “stimulate behavior such as voting” (403, 388). Per this research, pro-Biden super PACs were driven to design political ads that elicit emotional and empathetic responses from their target swing state voters.

To do so, super PACs implemented the advertising strategy described by persona analytics researcher Joni Salminen and his fellow scholars: featuring subjects—both human and topical—that swing state voters can empathize with. In his study, “How Does Personification Impact Ad Performance and Empathy?” Salminen et alia discover that digital ads featuring a subject or “personified user” that the consumer can relate to receive “increase[d] advertising click performance,” which was a focal aim of super PACs’ media strategy (Salminen et al. 141). Furthermore, the study concludes that including such “personified users” within ads “increase[s] the empathy of the created ad[s],” with “empathetic messages improv[ing] performance” (Salminen et al. 151). Such an insight, when taken in tandem with Brader’s findings on evoking empathy via ad content, affirms that presenting personalized content in political ads can spark empathy, not only increasing engagement with said ads but also invigorating voter turnout.

On this basis, pro-Biden super PACs targeted an empathetic response from swing state voters, as revealed by rhetorical analysis of ads created and dispersed by super PACs. They employ rhetorical strategies to engage swing state voters by targeting three main areas of empathy: experience, language, and demographics.

First, super PACs used curated diction and imagery in ads to prompt empathy with Biden in swing state voters through shared experiences and similar views on important issues. Such a rhetorical strategy is exemplified in a Priorities USA Action ad titled “Meet Joe.” Since Priorities USA Action was designated by “Joe Biden’s presidential campaign [to be] the campaign’s preferred political-action committee,” subsequent analysis will use ads from this super PAC (Thomas). The ad begins by stressing Biden’s childhood in a “Catholic family,” appealing to voters with similar religious backgrounds (“Meet Joe” 0:02). Here, Biden’s Catholic upbringing is mentioned first due to the high number of Christian swing state voters, with an average of 24.1% of Catholic citizens and 82.6% of Christian citizens between the six most contested swing states—Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Florida (Jones). The ad then characterizes Biden as “the teenager who washed windows to pay for school,” emphasizing his modest background (“Meet Joe” 0:07). Priorities USA Action underscores this experience to appeal to rural and low-income families who may relate to Biden, keeping in mind that as of 2019, each of the six pivotal swing states had a median household income below the national average of \$65,712 (US Census Bureau). As the ad draws to a close, it displays multiple images of Biden next to Barack Obama while distinguishing him as “the man who came to the White House and achieved healthcare reform” (“Meet Joe” 0:15). By depicting Obama in conjunction with the mention of “healthcare reform,” Priorities USA Action alludes to Biden’s role in the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), known colloquially as Obamacare. In doing so, Priorities USA Action aims to mobilize swing state voters in favor of the ACA, bearing in mind that the ACA protected a total of over five million voters with previously declinable pre-existing conditions in the six swing states (Kaiser Family Foundation).



Second, pro-Biden super PACs appealed to swing state voters' language and culture to make them more likely to engage with ads, and by extension, their message. Across the pro-Biden ads on the Priorities USA Youtube page, nineteen video ads had versions in Spanish, marked as "ESP" or "SPN" in the title. Given the high proportion of Spanish speaking voters in crucial swing states like Texas (25.8%), Florida (19.65%), and Arizona (17.98%), Priorities USA Action must be taking the extra time to make translated versions of the ads to target these decisive voters (World Population Review). Such rhetorical intent targeting swing state voters is further made evident by a press release published by Priorities USA Action, announcing a "\$1.9 million Florida ad buy on Spanish language TV in the Miami media market" alongside a "\$726,000 radio ad buy targeting Latino voters in Arizona and Florida" (Priorities USA). Beyond translation, some ads are initially crafted to appeal to both language and culture. For instance, in an ad titled "Caballero," a man with a Central American accent disparages Trump by asserting that "our families did not come to America to trade one caudillo for another," and that "we [instead] need a caballero like Joe Biden" ("Caballero" 0:01). Here, the ad's inclusive language such as "our families," inclusion of an accented Latin American speaker, and reference to "com[ing] to America" are all designed to stir empathy in swing state voters with similar accents and immigrant backgrounds. Moreover, the ad depicts Trump as a "caudillo"—a Spanish term "used pejoratively" for 20th century "authoritarian rule[rs]" in Latin America—to portray him as a de facto dictator reminiscent of those that the families of today's voters may have initially emigrated from (Perea). Simultaneously, the ad juxtaposes its depiction of Trump by portraying Biden as a "caballero"—denotatively meaning "knight" and "old gentleman"—to emphasize his character in terms Spanish speakers are more likely to empathize with (Merriam-Webster).

Third, super PACs aimed to feature individuals in their ads with similar race, age, and occupations to the majority demographics in swing states. On a general level, super PACs like Priorities USA Action make different versions of presidential ads for each state, substituting the specific name and features of each state to make ads feel more personalized—an efficacious strategy in prompting voter engagement, as outlined by Salminen above (141). However, super PACs also create targeted and distinct ads for swing states to maximize voters' empathetic response, as seen by Priorities USA Action's Youtube ad campaign in April 2020 (YouTube). The ad campaign designated unique ads to air in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Florida, with each corresponding ad featuring a different individual representative of popular demographics in the given swing state. The Michigan ad featured Rachel, a white millennial woman employed as a nurse ("Rachel MI" 0:09), to match Michigan's 79.2% white population, majority (50.7%) female population, and median age of 39 (US Census Bureau QuickFacts; Data USA). Moreover, Michigan saw an average of 1.25 million annual hospitalizations excluding COVID-19 cases, hence the choice to use a veteran nurse (Michigan Vital Stats). The Wisconsin ad featured Lynn, an octogenarian white woman stressing her background as a retired nurse with "underlying medical conditions" ("Lynn WI" 0:05). Accordingly, Lynn encompasses the popular demographics of Wisconsin: 87.0% white, 17.5% age 65 or older, and 50.2% female, with over 2 million people with "health conditions that put them at higher risk of getting severely ill" (US Census Bureau QuickFacts; Mills). The Florida ad featured Virgil, a Latino middle-aged man speaking from rural Florida ("Virgil FL" 0:01). With regard to elections in Florida, election analyst and professor Susan MacManus, concludes "it's often race and ethnicity that makes a difference" in addition to "generational lines" (Man and MacManus). Action Priorities USA

featured Virgil on this basis, to appeal to Florida's large Hispanic and Latino population (26.5%) and retirement-age population (20.5%) (US Census Bureau QuickFacts; Himes and Kilduff).

### **Partisan Support Strategy**

In addition to a candidate-specific strategy, existing scholarship analyzing the 2012 election also identified two other super PAC strategies: a partisan electoral strategy and a support strategy. Regarding the former, political scientists Diana Dwyre and Evelyn Braz conclude that super PACs pursued a partisan electoral strategy, focused on broadly winning elections to maximize influence in government. Such a strategy is outlined in their 2015 article, "Super PAC Spending Strategies and Goals," which finds that many super PACs allocated their spending "according to an electoral strategy to impact the partisan composition of government" (Dwyre and Braz 251). More specifically, Dwyre and Braz found that 78% of partisan super PACs in 2012 were "party congruent organizations," which they define as super PACs that "targeted the same races that the national parties' congressional campaign committees targeted" (255). Political science professors Michael S. Rocca and Jared W. Clay expand on this idea, citing Dwyre and Braz in their 2021 paper, "Allocating Unlimited Money: What Explains Super PAC Spending in Congressional Elections?" Rocca and Clay framed super PACs as "electoral strike forces" that are "perfectly suited for short-term strategies in the pursuit of electoral goals," affirming Dwyre and Braz's emphasis on super PACs pursuing short-term "electoral strategies" (Rocca and Clay 230).

In identifying a super PAC support strategy, scholars build on Dwyre and Braz's work to discover that some 2012 super PACs that operated primarily in a managerial capacity, dedicated toward coordinating other super PACs. In their paper, Dwyre and Braz introduce the concept of "extended party networks," where aligned partisan super PACs worked cooperatively with one

another toward unified goals (246). The existence of such party networks raises the question: who manages the coordination between super PACs? The answer lies in specialist Sam Garrett's report to Congress titled "Super PACs in Federal Elections: Overview and Issues for Congress," in which he describes how certain super PACs take on "ephemeral roles" for elections, built to support the existing "network" of other super PACs (Garrett 14).

In the 2020 election, pro-Biden super PACs not only employed both of the above strategies, but functionally unified them to establish a partisan support network, as seen in three key respects: administrative expenditures, interorganizational transfers, and project partnerships. First, expenditure data reveals that liberal super PACs spent significant amounts of money for research and administrative purposes, suggesting that partisan super PACs function to support a larger network. The five largest liberal super PACs spent a total of \$17.9 million and \$35.6 million respectively for "strategy and research" and "administrative and salary" purposes unrelated to campaign spending (OpenSecrets). Second, millions of dollars were transferred between liberal super PACs, indicating an established connection between these super PACs in pursuit of a unified objective. The five leading liberal super PACs spent \$27.6 million in transfers to other super PACs, with the three or more of the "top vendors [or] recipients" of those super PACs being other super PACs (OpenSecrets). Third, liberal super PACs worked together in 2020 to launch collaborative campaign initiatives. For example, Priorities USA Action and the Senate Majority PAC jointly launched a "\$7.5 million advertising campaign" in August 2020, part of a "larger, multi-pronged vote-by-mail messaging effort" (Schouten). In sum, these facets of cooperation between liberal super PACs indicate the convergence of a partisan electoral strategy and a support strategy in 2020, resulting in a partisan support network.

More specifically, within this partisan support network, liberal super PACs allied to promote Biden alongside Congressional Democratic candidates, particularly in swing states. As established above, single-candidate pro-Biden super PACs targeted swing states specifically in rhetoric and distribution. However, expenditure data reveals that liberal super PACs supporting Congressional candidates not only support Biden, but focus on swing states as well. For instance, though the Senate Majority PAC's primary purpose is to support Senate races, the super PAC donated \$20,727,555 to the Priorities USA Action super PAC, which in turn supports Biden (OpenSecrets). Moreover, the Senate and House races that liberal super PACs focused their spending on were all in swing states: Michigan, North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, Texas, Maine, and Iowa (OpenSecrets). The qualitative nature of such coordinated super PAC support also reflects a focus on swing states, as ad campaigns featuring Biden with Congressional candidates were directed nearly exclusively to races in closely contested states (Rogers and Raju).

Furthermore, such super PAC behavior is driven by pursuit of two objectives: increasing voter enthusiasm for Biden and maximizing straight-ticket voting. First, super PACs are incentivized to associate Biden with candidates in lower level elections, because voters are more favorable toward their local and state representatives. As found by a study analyzing public perception of government and representatives, citizens "negatively perceive political institutions [like Congress] while evaluating their own familiar individual members of these institutions more positively" (Lammers et al. 1). Thus, since citizens are able to interact more closely with members at lower levels of government, super PACs aimed to connect the Biden campaign with local and state campaigns to increase the likelihood of appealing to those voters. Second, super PACs look to maximize straight-party voting, to simultaneously raise support for Biden and other Democratic candidates. As defined by professors Bryan Campbell and Michael Byrne,

straight-ticket voting “is cast[ing] votes in multiple races” consistently for one party, and can be done via the selection of a single ballot option in certain states, or manually, by exclusively selecting candidates from one party for every race (Campbell and Byrne 718). Increasing voters’ use of this option is advantageous for Biden, as he is able to ensure Democratic votes from citizens who may not have initially supported him, or who are otherwise unenthusiastic about his campaign. Hence, pro-Biden super PACs were motivated to invigorate straight-ticket voting, launching ads that encouraged voters to “vote blue” and prompt a “blue wave” rather than voting for Biden exclusively (Svitek).

### **Conclusion**

As revealed by an analysis of super PAC ads and correspondent expenditure data, pro-Biden super PACs focused on using media to secure voters in swing states through a candidate-specific strategy and a partisan support strategy. In the former, pro-Biden super PACs appealed to swing state voters with curated rhetoric via targeted ad campaigns, and in the latter, liberal super PACs cooperated to support Biden and other Democratic candidates in tandem to maximize voter turnout. These findings fill a gap in existing scholarship, offering insights about the successful strategies super PACs used to secure an electoral victory in 2020—and by extension, determine the respective policies controlling every aspect of American governance for at least the next four years. With the growth of super PACs’ electoral influence in full swing, super PAC strategies are likely to become even more salient in 2024—both due to their capability in determining electoral outcomes and adaptability in response to an ever-shifting political landscape. Though this paper reveals the behavior of 2020 super PACs, such behaviors are likely to evolve in subsequent election cycles. Thus, continued research on this topic is essential to understanding how super PACs elect to impact 2024 and beyond.

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