

2020 ELECTION

“TRUMP IS SO SATURATED”: ANTI-TRUMP ATTACK ADS MIGHT ACTUALLY BE HELPING HIM, DEMOCRATIC GROUP FINDS

While doom-and-gloom ads thrive on Twitter and cable news, they can turn off voters whom Biden needs, according to the tech-minded operatives at Fellow Americans. “A lot of the blame-Trump-directly messaging actually resulted in lots of backlash,” says one.

BY PETER HAMBY

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FROM THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES.

The Lincoln Project, an anti-Trump super PAC formed by a platoon of MSNBC-famous Republican consultants, has become the subject of elite fascination. Its slashing ads—which mock the president’s corpulent frame, his mental acuity, and his flattery of dictators—have unleashed an avalanche of clap emojis on social media and won praise from the likes of **Joy Behar** and **Cher**. Its attacks are deployed on Twitter and cable news, where **Donald Trump** is guaranteed to see them. The Lincoln Project’s founders have been upfront about the goal: triggering the snowflake in the White House. “The fact that we’re able to use his mental infirmity and addiction to television to freeze him and manipulate him serves a broader purpose for the overall campaign in terms of taking him off message, disorganizing and disorienting him,” cofounder **Rick Wilson** told the *Washington Post* last month. By throwing the kind of haymakers that many Trump opponents long avoided, the group has burrowed deep under Trump’s skin and won the adoration of #Resistance types who gleefully share its videos and donate money to the cause, which

now includes defeating Republican senators like **Lindsey Graham**. But is the Lincoln Project changing any minds? Or is it just further inflaming the partisan divisions it seeks to condemn?

For almost a year a group of tech-minded Democratic operatives has quietly been probing those questions, in hopes of creating a method of advertising that actually persuades voters—and steering the Democratic Party away from the cartel of entrenched consultants who charge top dollar for evidence-free wisdom about how persuasion advertising is supposed to work. The outfit, called Fellow Americans, was launched without public fanfare in early 2020 to develop a data-driven testing model for campaign ad making—to prove which messages actually move the needle against President Trump with important groups of voters. Over the spring and summer, as the coronavirus pandemic choked off the economy and racial unrest took hold across the country, one lesson became abundantly clear from its testing: Ads that directly attack Trump, using his voice, news clips, or even just his face, have the effect of turning off not only persuadable voters, but also the Democratic-base voters whom **Joe Biden** needs in November. “The scary, doom-and-gloom, negative campaign spots that you typically see in an election year not only aren’t working with people that we want, they’re causing backlash among the people that we need,” said **Jess McIntosh**, a veteran Democratic communications strategist. “Trump is so saturated. You can make the case that you want to make without even saying his name. The point of ads that seem to work is not centering him, either with audio or visually. And that’s how people seem to be most receptive, which is sort of the exact opposite of what you saw in 2016, and even so far in 2020.”

McIntosh is a member of Fellow Americans, a 501(c)(4) incorporated in December 2019 by a trio of Democrats hailing from the digital side of **Barack Obama**’s political operations. In June, at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, Fellow Americans **released a digital ad** condemning Trump’s now infamous march across Lafayette Square, using scary clips of tear gas and the sounds of flash bangs as Trump held a Bible aloft outside of St. John’s Church. The spot changed almost no minds about Trump or the protests, according to testing responses among various voter subgroups.

“We assumed it would be a mover spot, and it just wasn’t,” McIntosh said. The video had the adverse effect of pushing away not just moderate voters, but also many Democratic-base voters, particularly young people, who find politics tiresome and irrelevant to their lives. “The folks who are younger, they’re more skeptical. They’re oftentimes just kind of like, Oh, I haven’t had the best luck in life. They don’t make a ton of money. They haven’t got a college degree,” said **Samarth Bhaskar**, a consultant for the group. “So with those groups in particular, we’ve seen when you put something in front of them that looks like a political ad or a political video, they get turned off right away. And so we tried our best to find other ways to, like, talk to them about these topics.”

What did resonate? A spot called “**Protest & Vote.**” The video featured upbeat music, brightly colored graphics, and images of nonviolent protests, with former president Obama urging activists to both register to vote and take to the streets. The ad made no mention of Trump or Biden. The spot worked, its creators said, because it adopted a series of themes and images that have been shown to resonate among young people, African Americans, and a subgroup of disengaged voters they call “struggling skeptics.” It was optimistic, showcased diverse faces, tied current fights to historical struggles, and avoided the Beltway political debates that consume a news media

growing ever more detached from the voting public. On Twitter the video about Trump in Lafayette Square received only 194 views. “Protest & Vote” got over 12,000.

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Those view counts, of course, are negligible when compared to any respectable paid media campaign. But Fellow Americans was not created to reach wide political audiences on its own. Instead, by contracting with a for-profit entity called Incite Studio, it's able to distribute its best-performing content and learnings across the liberal spectrum, to larger Democratic outfits like Priorities USA, NARAL, and NextGen America, as well as state-based progressive groups like Alliance for a Better Minnesota and Progress Michigan. Fellow Americans was created by **Nate Lubin**, the former director of digital strategy in the Obama White House; **Lindsay Holst**, the former director of digital strategy for Vice President Biden, who has since joined Biden's campaign; and **Shomik Dutta**, a former Obama fundraiser who runs the political investment fund Higher Ground Labs. The group, its founders said, wasn't invented to replace other outside groups or party committees. It was conceived as a creative laboratory, designed to answer a question not many people in the Democratic Party have bothered with over the years, despite obvious advancements in data collection and online research: Which messages actually change people's minds? “When we run persuasion advertising in politics, our objective is to change opinion, which, unlike conversion metrics, is very difficult to measure at scale,” said **Danielle Butterfield**, the paid media director for Priorities USA, which partners with Fellow Americans and has adopted its own “creative testing” strategies to prove which messages actually work when people see them.

In politics there are different types of advertising, each with its own goals and each serving different parts of a campaign. Technology has made much of the process more efficient. With advertising for donations or volunteer sign-ups, political campaigns can tap the large-scale optimization tools offered by big tech platforms and see quickly which ads are working and which aren't. If a potential supporter in Florida sees a fundraising ad on Facebook or YouTube, for instance, they either click to donate—what's called a “conversion”—or they don't. The best-performing content automatically replaces the lowest-performing, with variants as small as font size and color tested over and over again, revealing which versions generate the most engagement. Campaigns can watch this performance in real time and adjust their creative accordingly.

But with persuasion advertising—the cinematic, music-heavy spots you see on

television or in your feeds—campaigns have long relied on pollsters and self-styled gurus to create messages without knowing whether they eventually changed public opinion. The metrics around persuasion advertising remain either primitive or misleading. If a TV spot runs during a big NFL game, for instance, a lot of people will see it—but will it make a mom in Scottsdale more likely to support Biden? A snarky video mocking Trump’s inability to walk down a ramp might generate 1 million retweets, but will it register with a Black person in Jacksonville who didn’t vote in 2016? The outcomes are unmeasured. With persuasion advertising, potential messages are usually poll-tested beforehand, and the ads might be shown to focus groups—but once an ad is released to the public, there’s simply no way to qualitatively gauge how it’s landing with voters. Campaigns simply hope for the best.

Perhaps the most celebrated campaign commercial of the 2012 presidential race came from Priorities USA, then a pro-Obama super PAC. Its spot, called “Stage,” depicted **Mitt Romney** as a private-equity vulture who shuttered a Midwestern paper plant called Ampad during his time at Bain Capital. The ad starred laid-off plant workers, one of whom described how they were asked to build a stage for an announcement, which would be the plant’s closing. “It was like building my own coffin,” one Ampad employee testified. The gut-wrenching ad was seen as decisive in the battleground state of Ohio, which Obama ultimately won. The commercial was applauded by Democratic insiders and moved the media narrative even further against Romney. By November of 2012, Priorities bragged that the ad had been seen by 2.8 million people on YouTube, though it’s unclear how many saw it in Ohio. But there’s little polling evidence to suggest the ad, which launched in June, actually moved undecided or low-frequency Ohio voters one way or another. Today’s digital environment offers new ways to go around traditional consultants and figure out if a message actually resonates, Dutta said. “The way we used to test digital spots, you would just look at its performance online,” he told me. “If people liked it or clicked on it or commented or shared it, we’d say, ‘Great, this is getting a lot of engagement. We’ve done our job.’ And it turns out that based on the audience that you actually want to reach with your ad, it could be that all the wrong people are engaging with it. And sometimes for all the wrong reasons.”

Fellow Americans partnered with two firms—Civis Analytics and Swayable—for what it

called “creative pretesting.” In the same way a pharmaceutical company would use a control group and a treatment group for drug testing, Civis and Swayable show ads to different sets of demographic groups over the internet, who are asked to take a survey before and after watching. “We are at this critical moment when people are looking at empirical evidence about whether messages work, and in politics, you still have poll-testing of messages, which is bullshit,” Swayable CEO **James Slezak** told me. “A pollster calls people up and says, ‘If I said this, what would you say? Would this message be persuasive?’ But there is no science that can predict how persuasive it will be. In a drug trial you don’t give a drug to a 1,000 people and ask them if they get better the next day. You have a test group and a control group. You run experiments, measuring certain things in a structured protocol that actually proves it can cause an impact.” Swayable recruits digital users using a network of popular apps, games, and publishers, rewarding them for watching an ad and then participating in a survey afterward. Specific voter demographics—like suburban women in Florida, under-40 Black men in Wisconsin, or religious voters in Pennsylvania—can be targeted based on known information or behavior-based segmentation modeling. Swayable and Civis began honing these digital tactics in the 2018 midterms, and another Democratic group, Open Labs, is doing similar survey work against addressable television audiences. But this is the first presidential cycle in which creative testing has crept into mainstream Democratic practice.

Dutta told me that this kind of testing works like a focus group at a much larger scale, allowing Swayable and Civis to measure specific outcomes and bypass the gut assumptions that usually fuel ad making. “You can ask people really foundational questions like, ‘Are you more or less likely to support Donald Trump?’ And over thousands of repetitions, you can start learning really interesting stuff that you couldn’t get by just releasing something online and watching the engagement go,” he said. “So through this process Swayable found that fully 25% of all ads the Democratic Party ran in 2016 drove people in the wrong direction.” Dutta cited one **Hillary Clinton** ad called “Mirrors,” which showed young girls looking in the mirror, intercut with Trump making sexist comments about various women. The assumption in Brooklyn was that it would juice support among women voters and the parents of daughters, while further driving up negative views of Trump. “I thought it was one of

those powerful spots,” Dutta said. “It made me cry. But it turns out when Swayable tested it afterwards, it actually created huge backlash amongst undecided voters. And it made them more likely to support Trump. It just goes to prove that we have all these embedded biases as Democrats.”

Among those biases: that Trump’s loathsome personal qualities are enough to rally Democrats to vote against him in November. That bet proved to be a miscalculation by the Clinton campaign in 2016, and according to Fellow Americans, voters are largely rejecting messages that go after Trump personally rather than issues like his administration’s response to the pandemic. Its testing, particularly around coronavirus messaging, revealed that personality-focused attacks on Trump, specifically ads using Trump’s image or voice, were almost useless. “On COVID in particular, and then with the Black Lives Matter protests as well, a lot of the blame-Trump-directly messaging actually resulted in lots of backlash,” Bhaskar said. “Not just with conservatives, but also with moderate viewers and base-Democrat viewers.” Those messages either pushed on-the-fence voters back into Trump’s camp or alienated low-propensity voters who are already contemptuous of politics and have little interest in the kind of partisan back-and-forth that national Democrats and the media find so compelling. Those voters have low levels of “social trust,” Fellow Americans found, and messages that featured Trump or rising death tolls or administrative failure had the adverse effect of reaffirming their skepticism of the political process.

When COVID hit, “we needed to quickly take Trump out of a lot of our content,” McIntosh said. “Even if the goal was to say, ‘Trump has really messed up the coronavirus response,’ we can get that response, but we can do it without showing Trump. We’ll do it in other creative ways. We will definitely talk about his record, and people will walk away with the message that we wanted them to get. But the way to get there is just not the way that it has been done so far this year.” Before the pandemic, Fellow Americans was primarily testing ads related to gun violence and climate change. Its creative testing abilities allowed it to pivot almost overnight into doing rapid response around the virus—a topic never before seen in presidential politics. Almost overnight it could see which messages were resonating among the voter subgroups it had been targeting: suburban women, nonwhite voters, young people,

moderate nonreligious conservatives, and “struggling skeptics”—younger and low-income people who don’t usually participate in elections.

Its best-performing ads had a few things in common: They were optimistic; they included President Obama; they used simple facts and figures; or they starred regular people rather than politicians. Messages about Biden performed best when they avoided Trump contrasts or featured testimonials from young people who portrayed him as a bridge builder and focused on his unifying message. The group also discovered that as people stayed at home, living on their smartphones and Zoom calls, new ad formats were becoming more compelling than the traditional 30-second glossy ad. Homemade straight-to-camera testimonials from regular people talking about the pandemic far outperformed conventional ads about policy or negative ads about Trump. “The thing that I always find the most surprising is that the worst lighting is actually predictive of better engagement,” Lubin said. One of Fellow Americans’ most powerful videos was called “**Evie**,” which featured a woman talking about her mother, a Holocaust survivor, who died of COVID before her daughter could say goodbye. It ended with some simple text onscreen: “Tell the Trump administration to take care of our elders.” With Americans now spending more time on their smartphones than with TV screens, as a recent eMarketer study **revealed**, ads like “Evie” have a more familiar style and logic for viewers than a heavily produced political ad. “It’s a credibility thing,” Lubin said. “These are real people who were probably on Zoom or Google Hangouts, but you know it was a legitimate person who was horribly affected. They lost a loved one. And you can kind of feel the genuineness of that.”

Fellow Americans also decided to shun traditional ad makers for its creative efforts, instead tapping a network of creators outside the world of politics. It recruited animators, graphic designers, and even art teachers from around the country to create memes, GIFs, and graphics that get shared in Instagram and Snapchat Stories and Facebook groups, simple visual formats that have become vernacular for your everyday social media user. Holst, the Fellow Americans cofounder now working for the Biden campaign, said the project’s mission is to force Democrats to step outside of their own informational bubbles, especially Twitter and cable news, Beltway addictions that are distorting how political elites understand the country, its interests, and its media habits. The people making ads, she said, should probably have a better

grasp on what voters actually want to consume. “In politics you have this very limited pool of brains coming up with the content, and very often those brains don’t belong to actual audiences we are trying to reach,” Holst told me. “You can do a poll to figure out what kind of ads to run, sure, but the findings are very often an expression of what you test in the first place. If we want to do the best possible job of reaching a core set of audiences, maybe we should pool ideas out of those actual audiences?”

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