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天壤之别: BIDEN'S 2020 CAMPAIGN APPEAL TO TRUMP SUPPORTERS VIA HIS  
CHINA FOREIGN POLICY RHETORIC

by

ANGELICA NAVARRO

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR THOMAS KIM  
PROFESSOR SUMITA PAHWA

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## Abstract

Foreign policy rhetoric as a campaign strategy is limited in the current literature. The U.S.' polarized political climate has divided voters along domestic issues. Therefore, foreign policy may be one of the few remaining "common ground" issues upon which U.S. presidential candidates can secure a broad, national coalition across the political spectrum. Pulling from Joe Biden's speeches during his 2020 presidential campaign from C-SPAN's coverage, I analyze his rhetoric in relation to China in a possible attempt to appeal to 2016 blue-collar Trump supporters. My results reflect Biden's use of four major frames in his China foreign policy rhetoric relating to economic competition, Donald Trump's "secret" bank account in China, COVID-19, and the perceived loss of American prestige on the international stage. By studying President Joe Biden's 2020 appeal to Trump supporters via a rhetorical framing of China, this thesis explores a new potential theoretical breakthrough, ripe for scholarly investigation: presidential candidates may be turning to foreign policy to gain voters from their opponent's base, thus securing a bipartisan coalition.

Keywords: China, Joe Biden, rhetoric, campaign, foreign policy

## Introduction

The 2016 U.S. presidential election was an epitomized example of the power of candidates' rhetoric. We witnessed a single candidate's discourse framing sway voters from both mainstream parties (i.e., the Democratic and Republican parties) to support him. In 2016, Donald Trump framed his campaign rhetoric as an appeal to return to traditional American values, where the blue-collar American would be prioritized. Trump took advantage of the discontent many working class Democrats felt toward the Obama years and the economic hardships his Recession-era economic policies wrought upon them. In line with Trump's appeal to return to traditional American values, Trump's rhetoric regarding the U.S.-Mexico border and isolationist economic policy proposals were particularly appealing to voters from both sides of the political party spectrum.<sup>1</sup> Seeing this example, and apprehensive of the Hillary Clinton campaign's overconfident strategy in key swing states, the 2020 Biden campaign may have taken a careful approach with regards to Biden's rhetoric. A notable inclusion in Biden's rhetoric was China. While the existing literature regarding sitting presidents' use of foreign policy to establish a favorable national agenda is vast, the literature regarding U.S. *presidential candidates'* use of foreign policy rhetoric to sway voters is lacking in comparison. The literature that does exist often discusses candidates doing so to appeal to their own political base. For example, in the presidential election of 1992, Bill Clinton utilized foreign policy rhetoric to criticize incumbent President George H.W. Bush's humanitarian track record and further affirm the Democratic vote. When the literature *does* discuss candidates utilizing foreign policy rhetoric to appeal to voters from the opposing party, the scapegoat burden is almost entirely focused on the incumbent's incompetence, rather than the foreign entity. For example, in the election of 1980, candidate

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<sup>1</sup> Dias, Elizabeth, et al. "Voices from Democratic Counties Where Trump Won Big." *TIME.Com*, <https://time.com/voices-from-democratic-counties-where-trump-won-big/>.

Ronald Reagan aimed to sway Farm Belt Democrats by criticizing incumbent President Jimmy Carter's grain embargo on the Soviet Union. Reagan effectively shifted the responsibility of the foreign policy threat to the incumbent rather than the present foreign entity. The existing literature contends that candidates utilize foreign policy rhetoric, specifically rhetoric emphasizing the alleged threat posed by foreign entities, to posit themselves as strong leaders and to emphasize the incompetence of their opponent as commander-in-chief.

However, I explore my theory that presidential candidates may also agenda set specific foreign policy issues to peel off members of the opponent's electoral coalition. I arrived at my theory from my observations of Biden's speech rhetoric and the intense political polarization the U.S. electorate has consistently experienced within the past decade.<sup>2</sup> The 2016 presidential election in particular exposed the recent polarization trend. The new polarization was evident in very fundamental domestic issues (e.g., the economy, abortion, the U.S.-Mexico border, climate change, racism, LGBTQ+ issues, etc.), which has further exacerbated in light of recent major events, such as the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, because Hillary Clinton's loss has been partly attributed to Democrats defecting to vote for Trump, Biden could not afford to ignore Trump supporters as potential voters. In order to win, Biden would have to form a coalition among 2016 Trump supporters. I specifically refer to these voters as 2016 Trump supporters because many 2016 Trump supporters were long-time Democrats before they defected to vote for Trump. It's reasonable to assume that Biden would want these voters back. I argue that the Biden campaign recognized that an effective strategy to form a voting bloc within this group, without alienating more liberal Democrats, would require the use of foreign policy as a selling point. However, foreign policy also has the potential to be a

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<sup>2</sup> "The Shift in the American Public's Political Values." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, 20 Oct. 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/interactives/political-polarization-1994-2017/>.

polarizing topic (e.g., the war in Afghanistan and immigration). With the appropriate rhetorical framework though, I argue that the Biden campaign may have recognized that China can pose a “threat” that appeals to ideals on both sides of the U.S. political spectrum. For Democrats, China can be seen as a threat to democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. For Trump supporters, particularly the blue-collar and working-class, China and its cheap labor is a threat to their economic prosperity. I noted that Biden’s rhetoric shifted to emphasize matters that would concern blue-collar workers. In this manner, I arrived at my hypothesis that Biden may have deliberately discussed China as a foreign threat to appeal to the blue-collar workers Hillary lost in 2016. My hypothesis thus may point to a broader emerging pattern, which has not been discussed in the existing literature. Candidates may deliberately agenda set foreign policy issues to appeal to the opposing party’s voters in order to secure election victories in a new polarized political climate that leaves little room for bipartisan agreement on domestic issues.

My hypothesis contrasts with the literature’s assertion that candidates agenda set foreign policy issues to affirm their own political base and, once they have received the nomination, to appeal to the general national American electorate. Again, I specifically hypothesize that in 2020, Biden used China rhetorical frames to peel off 2016 Trump supporters in key swing states because he could not sacrifice framing his domestic policies in a manner that would appeal to Trump supporters without alienating Democrats. Examples of swing states where he may have used a foreign policy rhetoric that emphasized China include Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin.<sup>3</sup> He may have done so by emphasizing a narrative of economic competition, jobs, and international prestige, while simultaneously avoiding frames that would typically appeal to Democrats in solidly blue states. If this is true, I expect to see Biden use particular discourse frames about China that emphasize manufacturing, jobs, and beating China in emerging

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<sup>3</sup> I argue he may have also done so in other states such as Florida, Iowa, Ohio, and Arizona, however less frequently.

industries when speaking to conservatives in swing states, which are not frames that Democrats are necessarily interested in. Moreover, I expect Biden to *deemphasize* frames surrounding China that would appeal to Democrats (e.g., human rights violations and climate change) when he has a reasonable level of expectation that Trump supporting audiences are in attendance. This would contrast with what the existing literature would lead us to expect. The existing literature would lead us to expect that Biden would (1) craft his China foreign policy rhetoric to appeal to Democrats (e.g., China's human rights abuses, negative climate change contributions, etc.), (2) craft his rhetoric to appeal to the broader American audience, and/or (3) mainly craft his rhetoric to emphasize Donald Trump's incompetence in the face of the threat of China.

In my results and analysis section, I discuss my findings and the strategy I can discern from Biden's rhetorical patterns on China. I find that Biden discussed China in approximately 33% of his campaign events in swing states and that his rhetoric could have been presumed to be aimed at blue-collar workers in industries that have been directly and negatively affected by trade policies with China. I was able to presume this from both the locations where Biden made his speeches and the text analysis that I conducted. Biden mainly mentioned China in locations where manufacturing had historically been a main source of employment for the working-class. Manufacturing in the U.S. has experienced a significant decline in the face of competing, cheaper Chinese manufacturing.<sup>4</sup> Within the text of his speeches, Biden consistently explicitly called out to unions and the working class, effectively positioning them as the targets for his speeches.<sup>5</sup> While Democrats have historically appealed to working-class voters in the

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<sup>4</sup> From 2001 (when China entered the World Trade Organization) to 2013, 2.4 million U.S. manufacturing jobs were displaced. Manufacturing jobs made up 75.7% of the jobs that U.S. trade with China displaced. Kimball, Will, and Robert E. Scott. "China Trade, Outsourcing and Jobs: Growing U.S. Trade Deficit with China Cost 3.2 Million Jobs between 2001 and 2013, with Job Losses in Every State." *Economic Policy Institute*, 11 Dec. 2014, <https://www.epi.org/publication/china-trade-outsourcing-and-jobs/>.

<sup>5</sup> In almost all of his speeches, Biden delivered some version of the following blurb: "The middle class built this country... and unions built the middle-class."



manufacturing industry, for decades it has been an appeal to simply reaffirm a loyal voter base. In 2016, however, it is precisely this group that the Hillary Clinton campaign may have taken for granted, allowing Trump to appeal to them instead. Consequently, in 2016, this once confirmed Democratic voter base became a swing voter base as they chose Trump, now leading Democratic candidates to scramble and refocus their appealing efforts to re-convince working-class Rust Belt voters to return to the Democratic Party. However, due to the increasingly polarized political climate surrounding domestic issues, my hypothesis explores the theory that foreign policy has become the most strategic platform to attract conservative blue-collar workers. Thus, Biden may have turned to utilize China, framed into very particular themes.

Biden used four main discourse themes surrounding China. The main underlying sub-theme among the four frames Biden employed is a narrative of Trump as a white-collar elite who holds stronger loyalties to China than to normal Americans, particularly the blue-collar workers that voted for him. In the first theme, Biden implicitly claimed traditional blue-collar manufacturing industries are in decline because of both China's "abuses" and, more importantly, Trump's deliberate facilitation of those abuses. According to Biden, Trump's loyalty is further underlined by his willingness to pay China taxes and not the U.S. government, as well as his trade wars and policies that are harmful to blue-collar workers. This argument is reflected in the second theme where Biden repeatedly mentioned a "secret" bank account that Trump has in China. In the third frame, Biden discussed COVID-19 in a manner that once again highlighted Trump's incompetence and friendliness toward China. He claimed that Trump knew about the seriousness of COVID-19 in January 2020 but delayed his response to the virus and instead praised President Xi Jinping. This third frame especially contradicts the existing literature's arguments (i.e., foreign policy rhetoric is meant to retain a politician's existing base) as the frame

is one that would turn off Democrats. It holds racial implications about China's connection to COVID-19 that is more in line with a Republican's rhetoric. Finally, in the fourth frame, Biden claimed that despite the greatness of the U.S. military, U.S. international prestige has declined thanks to Trump. The opinion that the U.S. must remain the most powerful country on the international stage is also a notion that is more salient among Republicans (or conservatives) than among Democrats. Ultimately, Biden potentially used these frames to discredit the "outsider" framing Trump posited for himself in 2016, and to establish himself (Biden) as an underdog from a blue-collar town who knows what it's like to be looked down upon by the wealthy. From my analysis, we can begin to see an emerging strategy driving the utilization of foreign policy discourse in presidential campaigns as a tool to form a bipartisan coalition within a polarized electorate that has an increasingly narrow list of domestic issues both sides of the spectrum can agree on.

## **Literature Review**

While vast amounts of literature exist regarding sitting presidents' utilization of foreign policy rhetoric to deliberately establish a favorable national agenda, relatively minimal literature has been produced regarding a similar strategy in *presidential candidates'* rhetoric. My thesis is exploring the argument that presidential candidates also strategically use such rhetoric to craft a supportive coalition, thus increasing their successful electoral prospects. The literature that has been produced thus far regarding this phenomenon seemingly falls into four main arguments discussing how and why presidential candidates shape their foreign policy rhetoric. The first camp argues that candidates deliberately highlight foreign issues in their speeches to highlight the incumbent's "fecklessness" and promote their own qualifications as commander-in-chief,

rather than to present any tangible foreign policy proposals. The second school of thought claims that Democrats in particular use foreign policy to take on a hawkish persona, since Democrats are arguably considered to be relatively dovish (and therefore “weak” compared to Republicans). The third argument in the present literature argues that, once having received the nomination, presidential candidates utilize foreign policy to establish broad, national support. According to this argument, foreign policy is not necessarily targeted toward a specific voting group. The fourth camp contends that candidates deliberately position U.S. international prestige to be in threat, which the incumbent cannot successfully protect. This is considered to be a “framed threat,” deliberately promoted by presidential candidates via foreign policy rhetoric to evoke fear and anxiety among voters, in the hopes that voters will choose the candidate at the ballot box. China has particularly become a common target for politicians to weaponize as a foreign threat as Americans deal with the negative employment effects of globalization.

Exploring more in depth, the first major argument that scholars have raised has been that presidential candidates purposely use foreign policy to discredit the incumbent president’s ability to properly lead the nation on the international stage. According to Michael Armacost, candidates deliberately highlight foreign issues, framing them in an urgent light, to both emphasize the “fecklessness” of the incumbent and boost their qualifications as “plausible commander in chief.”<sup>6</sup> For example, in Ronald Reagan’s campaign for the presidential election of 1980, he hoped to attract the Farm Belt demography by criticizing the grain embargo that President Jimmy Carter had imposed on the Soviet Union as a response for their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. In the campaign for the presidential election of 1992, Bill Clinton criticized President George H.W. Bush’s refusal to admit Haitian refugees and promised that his presidency

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<sup>6</sup> Armacost, Michael H. *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections*, pp. 106-108.

would grant greater leniency and asylum.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the Ronald Reagan example may reflect the closest similarities to what I argue was Biden's strategy in 2020. Reagan produced rhetoric that emphasized a foreign threat in a potential attempt to attract supporters who may have otherwise voted Democrat.<sup>8</sup> Thus in 1980 a concern from the Reagan campaign was that the Farm Belt had the *potential* to be a swing vote but would continue to vote Democrat unless he tailored a very specific aspect of his foreign policy rhetoric, which was especially salient only to them.

On the other hand, Bill Clinton shaped his foreign policy rhetoric simply as a means to further affirm his appeal to members of his own political party, i.e., Democrats. Clinton posed the threat of the Haitian migrant crisis, but framed it to criticize President George H.W. Bush's lack of humanitarian spirit. While this makes sense for Clinton because he was appealing to members of his own party, who more than likely would not have appreciated a scapegoating of the Haitian refugees, Reagan's rhetoric (presented above) makes less sense under the present literature's existing arguments. Reagan's foreign threat rhetoric could have easily included the threat of the Cold War and the Soviet Union to stoke fear and anxiety, thus mobilizing potential Democratic voters to choose him. Instead, he shifted the responsibility to President Jimmy Carter's embargo. The Clinton example perfectly supports the existing literature's arguments: a candidate will craft a foreign policy rhetoric to further reaffirm their existing base. The Reagan example, however, displays an additional goal that has not been sufficiently discussed by the present literature. Candidates may use foreign policy rhetoric to target groups beyond those identified by the present literature (i.e., the candidate's own party and/or the national audience).

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>8</sup> In the previous presidential election, in 1976, a few states from the Farm Belt (specifically Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Missouri) voted Democrat.

"Historical Presidential Election Map Timeline - 270toWin." *270toWin.Com*, <https://www.270towin.com/historical-presidential-elections/timeline/>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.

Foreign policy rhetoric, which is a discourse tactic that has the potential to aggregate groups with differing domestic political inclinations (proven by its common use to appeal to a national audience), may also be specifically crafted to appeal to an opponent's voting base. This is the unspoken strategy that I hypothesize the Biden campaign identified and employed in 2020 to gain Trump voters.

In "No Love for Doves? Foreign Policy and Candidate Appeal," John Kane and Helmut Norpoth study the manner in which Democratic candidates position themselves in their foreign policy rhetoric, compared to Republican candidates. In my own analysis of Biden's rhetoric, their argument rings partly true. Kane and Norpoth analyze that previous literature has argued that Democratic candidates must present a more hawkish stance in foreign policy in order to effectively counteract a perceived Republican advantage. Hawks in international relations tend to be hard-liners, less likely to make concessions, and more willing to respond with force, compared to doves who are more likely to be cooperative.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, dovish practices can be perceived as relatively "weak," which is often considered a disadvantage for Democratic candidates when placed in comparison to traditionally hawkish Republican candidates who have a reputation of being "tough" or "strong."<sup>10</sup> This particular argument is supported by previous literature which argues that citizens generally prefer "strong" leaders in the realm of foreign policy, during both war and peace times.<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon was visible in the Democratic primaries for the presidential election of 2008. During the primaries, Hillary Clinton consistently placed herself to the political left of Barack Obama for almost every domestic issue; however,

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<sup>9</sup> Clare, Joe. "Hawks, Doves, and International Cooperation." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 58, no. 7, Sage Publications, Inc., 2014, pp. 1311–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24545624>.

<sup>10</sup> Kane, John V., and Helmut Norpoth. "No Love for Doves? Foreign Policy and Candidate Appeal." *Social Science Quarterly*, v. 98, n. 5. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/ssqu.12377>, pp. 1660.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

she positioned herself to his right on foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> It is evident in the existing literature that the manner in which Democratic candidates craft their foreign policy rhetoric tends to be a response to the perceived success or shortcomings of Republican candidates' rhetoric.

Kane and Norpoth's response tactic argument supports my theory that the Biden campaign formed its foreign policy strategy to counteract Trump's electoral success in 2016 among the blue-collar, working class. Moreover, in my analysis of Biden's rhetoric, his stance on China seems to support the argument that Democratic candidates posit themselves to be equally hawkish, if not *more* hawkish than their Republican opponent. However, this phenomenon specifically occurs in Biden's China rhetoric. In other foreign policy issues, Biden returns to the traditionally cooperative and "dovish" rhetoric style. For example, his campaign website states, "... President Biden will organize and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the Free World."<sup>13</sup> This contradicts Kane and Norpoth's argument, which would lead us to expect Biden to maintain a hawkish stance across the board. Rather, Biden's selective decisions of when to posit as a hawk point to a different strategy, where his tough rhetoric on China is a targeted attempt to out-hawk Trump in the eyes of Trump supporters that care deeply about China. Furthermore, similar to Armacost, the focus of Kane and Norpoth's argument also rests on the manner in which candidates frame their foreign policy rhetoric to appeal to the members of *their own* political party. There is no attention paid to a more complex strategy: whether candidates shape their foreign policy rhetoric to appeal to voters of the *opposing* party. In terms of domestic issues, regardless of the status of the polarized political atmosphere, common topics tend to be divisive (i.e., the economy, abortion, etc.). Foreign issues, however, can promote unity under the umbrella of shared nationality on the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1662.

<sup>13</sup> "American Leadership | Joe Biden." *Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website*, <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.

international stage and boost a national leader's popularity.<sup>14</sup> In this manner, candidates can hypothetically attract members of the opposing party who would otherwise vote for their usual political party's candidate. Thus, Kane and Norpoth's argument explains why Democratic candidates sometimes take on uncharacteristic hawkish foreign policy stances, but does not explain why Democratic candidates seemingly do so with very specific audiences and not across the board.

In *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*, Jennifer Mercieca and Justin Vaughn do touch upon the concept of crafting rhetoric that would satisfy two sides of a political spectrum as they analyze Barack Obama's rhetoric concerning foreign policy.<sup>15</sup> However, in their analysis, the two audiences that Obama perceived needed satisfying were the domestic and global audiences. Mercieca and Vaughn consider the domestic audience as one cohesive audience, without much deliberation on whether there could be differences in political opinion regarding foreign affairs. While their argument does support my hypothesis that foreign policy is an issue that can be successfully used to form a broad, national foundation of support for a candidate, their argument too quickly disregards the nuances within the domestic audience, which must be catered to by the candidate if they are to build cleavages of support. I hypothesize that the Biden campaign identified China as an issue upon which they could construct political support from both sides of the U.S.' domestic political spectrum. However, unlike Mercieca and Vaughn's assumption that the domestic audience would easily agree with a single version of a candidate's rhetoric, I believe Biden's campaign understood that the manner in which they framed China needed to differ depending on the particular audience. On one side,

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<sup>14</sup> Kazun, A. D. "'Rally Around the Flag' Effect. How and Why Support of the Authorities Grows During International Conflicts and Tragedies?." *Polis. Political Studies* 1.1 (2017): 136-146.

<sup>15</sup> Vaughn, Justin S., and Jennifer R. Mercieca. *The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations: Establishing the Obama Presidency*. Texas A&M University Press, 2014. *EBSCOhost*, pp. 117-118, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ecl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=707016&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

we see the recurring Democrat spiel: China is a repressor of human rights, a large emitter of carbon, and a reason why democratic nations must fortify their alliance.<sup>16</sup> On the other side, when the target audience is present, China is stealing jobs, responsible for COVID-19, and trying to beat us at the new employment market in electric energy – a rhetoric more aligned with Republican values.

Another common theme in presidential candidates' rhetoric is the concept of American international prestige. Candidates frame their foreign rhetoric to establish the United States in a position of imminent or occurring downfall on the international stage. This was present during John F. Kennedy's campaign where he complained that American prestige was in decline. Unlike the previous Reagan and Clinton examples, he did not craft his rhetoric to significantly criticize the incumbent and his policies. Rather, he promised to further escalate President Dwight Eisenhower's containment policies to protect the U.S.' prestige.<sup>17</sup> A similar strategy was utilized in the election of 1980 by Ronald Reagan, where he claimed that the incumbent, President Jimmy Carter, had allowed American prestige to decline.<sup>18</sup> Reagan's rhetoric, coupled with the ongoing global developments (e.g., the hostage crisis in Iran), most likely led Jimmy Carter to reshape his own rhetoric in response to the increased sense of low American prestige abroad among voters.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in the Kennedy example, Kennedy complained that a "missile gap" was forming between the United States and the Soviet Union, which he would close.<sup>20</sup> In this manner, Kennedy signaled the existence of a military threat, which would hypothetically create

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<sup>16</sup> "American Leadership | Joe Biden." *Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website*, <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Armacost, Michael H. *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections*, pp. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Johnstone, Andrew, and Andrew Priest. *U.S. Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy: Candidates, Campaigns, and Global Politics From FDR to Bill Clinton*, pp. 257.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>20</sup> Armacost, Michael H. *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections*, pp. 108.



feelings of fear or anxiety, effectively mobilizing voters to choose him as president. Biden seems to follow this tradition in his own rhetoric. He argues that although the U.S. continues to have the “most powerful military,” respect and trust in the U.S. and its presidency is in sharp decline as a result of Donald Trump’s inadequacy in the face of China’s threat.

Candidates deliberately frame threats in such a way to evoke mobilizing emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, anger, etc.) that will serve to benefit the candidate at the ballot. The idea of a “framed threat” is one that Bethany Albertson and Shana Kushner discuss in *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*. According to them, a “framed threat” is defined as a “Debted cause of harms (not necessarily physical), where harms can be delayed.” In contrast, an “unframed threat” is defined as a “Widely agreed upon cause of harm. Harms may include imminent bodily harm and/or death.”<sup>21</sup> Arousing anxiety in particular is a common campaign strategy.<sup>22</sup> Of course, there can exist a present and tangible “unframed threat” that would rationally lead to anxiety among the public (e.g., a pandemic, terrorist attack, economic downturns, etc.).<sup>23</sup> When tangible events that evoke feelings of imminent death or destruction are not present, candidates utilize their rhetoric to produce “framed threats,” effectively urging the public to focus on looming threats to evoke anxiety and feelings of efficacy, which can translate to the ballot box (i.e., if the public votes for the correct candidate, this threat will be resolved).<sup>24</sup> In terms of a foreign policy, a “framed threat” could be a rising power like China. However, Albertson and Kushner’s analysis implies that candidates maintain the same inflammatory rhetoric for every audience, regardless of potential differing priorities. This lack of further elaboration is probably due to the common assumption that candidates mainly craft their rhetoric

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<sup>21</sup> Albertson, Bethany, and Shana Kushner Gadarian. *Anxious politics: Democratic citizenship in a threatening world*. Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 19, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 24.

to appeal to their own base, rather than attempt to extract a cleavage from within the opposing party. Or, it could be due to the assumption, similar to Mercieca and Vaughn, that the domestic audience is a cohesive one with similar interests.

This assumption is also clear in James Paterson's "The Politics of Protection: America and Australia Compared." Paterson notes the increased prominence of protectionist and isolationist sentiments against foreign powers in election rhetoric. He observes that the use of such rhetoric in presidential campaigns is a strategy to rally an electorate among an American populace that is increasingly fearful of foreign economic threats, particularly China.<sup>25</sup> In his analysis however, he views Americans' increased fear of foreign actors as an independent factor that influences candidates' rhetoric instead of the reverse. Moreover, he further removes responsibility from candidates by arguing that the current rhetorical environment is a product of the U.S. electoral system. He argues that using rhetoric that scapegoats foreign powers is a consequence of the U.S.' primaries structure, where popular opinion selects the presidential nominee as opposed to a political party (which is common in other countries).<sup>26</sup> However, my thesis shows that such rhetoric is present even after the primaries, once a candidate has secured their party's nomination. Furthermore, while he acknowledges that candidates utilize their rhetoric to agenda set, his argument only covers candidates' attempts to win over members of their own political party to receive the party nomination. In other words, crafting such rhetoric is not necessarily done to gain supporters from the general electorate, much less members from the opposing party. It is instead only done in order to win the nomination. Once they have achieved this and are a presidential candidate, Paterson argues that the contender's rhetoric becomes less "extreme" and more moderate to appeal to a broader audience, and not completely alienate

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<sup>25</sup> Paterson, James. "The politics of protection: America and Australia compared." *Policy: A Journal of Public Policy and Ideas* 24.3 (2008), pp. 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

voters in the opposing party.<sup>27</sup> My thesis explores the possibility that the opposite can be true, which potentially occurred during Joe Biden's presidential campaign in 2020. I hypothesize that Biden's rhetoric became more extreme and targeted *after* his nomination, when his focus shifted to peeling off blue-collar Trump supporters. The theoretical implications would suggest that foreign policy rhetoric may be less a result of the nomination process. Rather, the audience throughout the election process and the prominence of political polarization has a greater influence on candidates' rhetoric.

In conclusion, the arguments I discussed above collectively have three main underlying *themes* regarding U.S. candidates' use of foreign policy rhetoric during their campaign. The first main theme is that candidates mainly focus on reaffirming their own political base. Democrats in particular use foreign policy rhetoric to strategically take on a hawkish stance in an effort to mitigate a perceived Republican advantage in foreign policy. Second, foreign policy rhetoric is employed to form a broad, national coalition. However, it assumes that the domestic audience has a cohesive opinion regarding foreign policy and that the same version of a candidate's rhetoric will work with every domestic audience. Third, foreign policy rhetoric is used to cause anxiety among the electorate with "framed threats." Again, this theory assumes that the "threat" is framed the same with every audience. The literature falls short in explaining why candidates may opt to utilize different versions of foreign policy rhetoric with different audiences *within* the domestic electorate. Moreover, it falls short in explaining why Biden would use language about China that is more aligned with Trump supporters' stance when speaking to them, but use Democratic-aligned language in different political environments. My thesis seeks to explore these gaps in the literature by arguing that the Biden campaign's China rhetoric points to a separate, increasingly relevant strategy, where candidates find that foreign policy rhetoric is one

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

of the few remaining tools they can still use successfully in a polarized electorate to form a bipartisan coalition. Of course, this remaining tool must be adjusted accordingly to the particular audience the candidate is speaking to.

### **Data and Methods Section**

My hypothesis is that in 2020, Joe Biden utilized China in his campaign rhetoric to peel off blue-collar Trump supporters, particularly in key swing states, by emphasizing specific dialogues that appeal to them, simultaneously avoiding rhetorical frames that appeal largely to Democrats in solidly blue states. In order to adequately explore my hypothesis, I analyzed Biden's campaign rhetoric when there was a reasonable expectation that blue-collar Trump supporters would be in the audience. My hypothesis is that when Biden had a reasonable expectation that working-class, blue-collar Trump supporters would be present in the audience, he used China discourse frames that emphasized competition, particularly the need to "beat" China at emerging industries (e.g., clean energy, new technologies, etc.). If this is true, I expect Biden to have used such frames when he was campaigning in key swing states; for example, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Florida, Michigan, and Wisconsin. A corollary hypothesis consistent with the first is that even when he is discussing *issues* that usually appeal to Democrats, like climate change, he will not use *frames* that appeal to Democrats (e.g., the environmental and humanitarian ramifications of climate change) and instead use frames that appeal to blue-collar audiences (e.g., job creation, conservation of American prestige abroad, etc.).

The data I collected for this thesis primarily came from C-SPAN's coverage of the 2020 Biden presidential campaign from September 3, 2020 until November 3, 2020, the day of the election. I specifically focused on speeches that Biden delivered in states that were highly

contested and/or voted for Donald Trump in 2016; for example, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida to name a few. It's reasonable to assume that these speech events would be more likely to have 2016 Trump supporters (and 2016 Democrat defectors) in the crowd.<sup>28</sup> My reasoning for that is that Biden would not have needed to utilize foreign policy in his rhetoric in a state that was reliably blue, based on its 2016 electoral record. I further discern between certain events within those states by not including in my data events that are clearly targeted toward typically blue groups (i.e., LGBTQIA+ voters, Latinx voters, African-American voters, etc.).

In addition, my time frame does not start earlier because Joe Biden did not receive the Democratic Party presidential nomination until mid-August.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, I do not expect him to have focused his campaign efforts or rhetoric to appeal to Republican voters until September because he would previously have been engaged in appealing to Democrats to secure the nomination among a large pool of contenders. This is reflected in C-SPAN's coverage during the latter half of August as Biden continued to campaign in blue states like Delaware. I utilize C-SPAN's coverage as my data because I found C-SPAN to have the most extensive reserve of Biden's raw campaigning rhetoric, without journalistic commentary. In addition, C-SPAN included the locations of Joe Biden's speaking events, which makes it relatively more methodologically justifiable for me to attach a potential audience (i.e., conservatives or Trump supporters). Moreover, C-SPAN has coverage of different aspects of Biden's campaign including general campaign events, rallies, round tables with voters, interactions with reporters, "get out the vote" events, and more. In addition, C-SPAN covered not just Biden's individual campaigning. It covered Kamala Harris, Dr. Jill Biden, and celebrity endorsers' campaigning as

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<sup>28</sup> Most of the speeches that I analyzed were along the Rust Belt, which was the location where many long-time Democrats defected and voted for Donald Trump in 2016.

Dias, Elizabeth, et al. "Voices from Democratic Counties Where Trump Won Big." *TIME.Com*, <https://time.com/voices-from-democratic-counties-where-trump-won-big/>.

<sup>29</sup> Elving, Ron. "Joe Biden's Long And Rocky Road To The Democratic Nomination." *NPR*, 16 Aug. 2020. *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/16/902640265/joe-bidens-long-and-rocky-road-to-the-democratic-nomination>.

well. However, I did not look at his campaign's rhetoric in all of these settings. I will not include analysis for moments when the campaign talks to reporters or journalists. For example, C-SPAN has coverage of when notable campaign members land in swing states and immediately begin to answer reporters' questions. I will not include this because I do not believe these are moments when the campaign would reasonably expect Trump voters to be in the audience. They are not interacting with voters directly.

Furthermore, I will not include *all* campaign events in key swing states because although their location is in a key swing state, many events are more clearly tailored to particular groups that tend to be solidly Democrat. For example, the Biden campaign hosted a "Souls to Polls" voter mobilization event on November 1, 2020 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.<sup>30</sup> The event featured mainly black, Christian community leaders. I contend that it is reasonable to treat this particular event as a campaign appeal to black voters (particularly black Christian voters) where Trump supporters were less likely to be present.<sup>31</sup> A similar instance can be found in a campaign rally with Lady Gaga in Pittsburgh.<sup>32</sup> Lady Gaga is a prominent community member and advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights, and would most likely not be featured if the target audience was conservative, Rust Belt Trump supporters.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, I do not expect the Biden campaign to have utilized rhetorical frames to appeal to Trump supporters in these kinds of events.

Moreover, I will focus only on Joe Biden's individual campaign rhetoric and not analyze his surrogate campaigners, particularly notable individuals such as Barack Obama, Kamala Harris, and Dr. Jill Biden. Obama is a controversial figure to the blue-collar Rust Belt voters that

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<sup>30</sup> "Joe Biden at Philadelphia 'Souls to the Polls' Event." *C-SPAN*, 01 Nov. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477671-1/joe-biden-philadelphia-souls-polls-event>.

<sup>31</sup> "Party Affiliation among Voters: 1992-2016." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/09/13/2-party-affiliation-among-voters-1992-2016/>.

<sup>32</sup> "Joe Biden Drive-In Rally in Pittsburgh with Lady Gaga." *C-SPAN*, 02 Nov. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477700-1/joe-biden-drive-rally-pittsburgh-lady-gaga>.

<sup>33</sup> Lavietes, Matthew, and Jonathan Allen. "Lady Gaga Fires up LGBTQ Rally for Stonewall Anniversary." *Reuters*, 28 June 2019. *www.reuters.com*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-lgbt-stonewall-idUSKCN1T1BN>.

Biden would be trying to attract if he indeed was trying to carve out a cleavage in the opposing party.<sup>34</sup> Thus, I do not believe that his individual presence and rhetoric would have been targeted toward presumed Trump supporters in the audience.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, I will not analyze Kamala Harris' rhetoric because her presentation (i.e., a woman of color) could have a turn off effect on the blue-collar rural white voters Biden would need to attract in key swing states. This argument is reasonable when we take into account their attitude toward Hillary Clinton in 2016. Trump's rhetoric was particularly powerful in framing Hillary as "lying Hillary" to these voters. The Biden campaign may have thus expected Joe Biden's classic all-American, white, and male presentation to be more tolerable in these states; therefore, making his individual rhetoric of particular interest in utilizing China to appeal to Trump supporters.

Thus, in gathering my data, my methodology was very simple. Within the parameters that I established previously (mentioned above), I individually collected the raw transcripts from every campaign event where I believe Joe Biden would have reasonably attempted to craft his rhetoric to include China in an effort to appeal to Trump supporters. With the parameters in place, I was ultimately left with thirty-three speaking events to collect data about and analyze. I analyzed the transcripts and determined the frequency at which he employed a frame about China in his rhetoric. I did so by first noting his explicit mention of the terms "China," "Chinese," and "Xi Jinping." I inferred that speeches in which he would use those terms would feature his campaign's crafted rhetoric. Within those speeches, I subsequently categorized the topics he discussed into themed frames.

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<sup>34</sup> Scheyder, Ernest, et al. "In 2016, Trump Won These Rust Belt Counties on the Economy. In 2020, He Might Lose Them over Coronavirus." *Reuters*, 19 Oct. 2020. [www.reuters.com, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-election-coronavirus-insight-idUKKBN27415X](https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-election-coronavirus-insight-idUKKBN27415X).

<sup>35</sup> Otterbein, Holly. "Obama Goes Full Throttle for Biden." *POLITICO*, 21 Oct. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/10/21/obama-for-biden-campaign-430636>.

### ***Methodological Limitations***

Of course, there is room for methodological limitations with the manner in which I collected this data. First, the manner in which many of the transcripts were presented in the C-SPAN closed captioning section were not automatically and cohesively collected into a single script. They were often broken up into multiple sections. Furthermore, many of the transcripts were not corrected. Because I am a single individual, constrained by the volume and timeline allowed for this project, I am not able to go through every transcript and correct every single syntax error that C-SPAN's closed captioning algorithm may have committed. When Biden mentioned China, I corrected those sections of the transcript; however, for the most part, I left the transcripts untouched. The message he is delivering is still very decipherable; however, some of my analysis may be impacted by syntax errors within the transcripts I reviewed. While the transcripts did have syntax errors, the errors were mainly due to Biden's natural cadence or slurring of words due to his regional accent. For example, when he meant to say "me," the algorithm picked it up as "may." When he meant to say "as," the algorithm picked it up as "us." Despite these minor syntax errors, C-SPAN's closed captioning algorithm was able to pick up main keywords, including "China," "Chinese," and "Xi Jinping."

In addition, there was a speaking event Biden completed where the audio quality was somewhat poor. This consequently affected the transcript. In many instances within that event, the transcript has certain gaps where there is no text for the content of Biden's speeches. However, because the audio is poor and not understandable, it is difficult for me to produce my own transcript for the content. Based on the nature of this event, however, the probability that Biden would mention China is low. Specifically, on October 29, 2020, Joe Biden visited



Florida.<sup>36</sup> I watched this particular video and am able to note that he did not mention China. But, the actual text does not adequately capture the first half of his speech. Thus, the first half of the transcript for this event is essentially missing. Because I watched the video, I know that Joe Biden did not mention China here because he was primarily focused on rousing a Latinx voting coalition. He explicitly mentions the diverse Latinx community in the state and immigration issues (in addition to his usual rhetoric about COVID-19, taxes, and employment, which he mentions in some variation at almost every event). Due to the length of the event and his speech, I was unable to produce my own transcript. However, because I have an extensive amount of content where I was able to collect a complete transcript, I do not believe that this particular shortcoming will have a significant impact on my analysis.

### ***Using County Margins of Victory***

Although I look primarily at Biden's rhetoric in swing states, the state-level information alone is not enough to discern whether Trump supporters would be present in the audience of each campaign event. A state could have barely voted for Hillary over Trump or vice versa, but the voting distribution within particular in-state areas could differ from the state-level distribution. In addition, I do not have access to reliable individual data for 2016 Trump supporters in particular areas. Thus, data at the county-level, specifically county margins of victory (MOV), is a better proxy for assigning a likelihood that Trump supporters would be present in an audience. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Biden campaign has completed an analysis on what each location's population's preferences are based on information similar to the county-level data I utilize. Based on this information, the Biden campaign likely

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<sup>36</sup> "Joe Biden Campaign Event in Florida." *C-SPAN*, 29 Oct.2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?477505-101/joe-biden-campaign-event-florida>.

designed their campaigning strategy to focus on utilizing China discourse frames in places where they could expect a larger number of voters that could be peeled away from voting for Trump. Furthermore, with the county-level data, I can more reasonably find a pattern and/or potential strategy for Biden's usage of particular China frames in his rhetoric.

## Results and Analysis

From the transcript data I analyzed, Biden mentioned China in his rhetoric in eleven out of the thirty-three speeches (33%) I reviewed in key swing states. When Biden included China in his rhetoric, there were four major themes he employed: China and Trump's economic abuses on the blue-collar American worker, Trump's "secret" bank accounts in China, COVID-19, and the alleged decline in American international prestige. Based on the specific frames Biden used to craft his rhetoric regarding these four themes, the possibility that Biden was specifically looking to peel off working class, blue-collar Americans who are directly affected by economic policies toward China and/or are employed in declining industries (e.g., manufacturing) is highlighted. This especially includes union workers (whom Joe Biden explicitly refers to in almost every speech), large numbers of which voted for Trump in 2016.<sup>37</sup> The Biden campaign may have targeted this group because there is a reasonable level of expectation that they already hold animosity toward China. In addition to further exacerbating that animosity by scapegoating

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<sup>37</sup> While the union vote ultimately went to Hillary Clinton, Trump only trailed behind by a mere eight points. Trump's margin was the best Republican union vote margin since Ronald Reagan in the election of 1984. This showed that the union vote cannot be taken for granted as a Democrat guarantee.

Bump, Philip. "Donald Trump Got Reagan-like Support from Union Households." *Washington Post*, 10 Nov. 2016. [www.washingtonpost.com, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/10/donald-trump-got-reagan-like-support-from-union-households/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/10/donald-trump-got-reagan-like-support-from-union-households/).

Pa, Alex Leary, and Kris Maher. "Democrats Labor to Stem Flow of Union Voters to Trump." *Wall Street Journal*, 2 Sept. 2019. [www.wsj.com, https://www.wsj.com/articles/democrats-labor-to-stem-flow-of-union-voters-to-trump-11567422002](https://www.wsj.com/articles/democrats-labor-to-stem-flow-of-union-voters-to-trump-11567422002).

China, Biden also frames Trump as having a positive relationship with China. Within his China rhetoric, Biden crafts a narrative where Trump has higher loyalties to China than to the American blue-collar, working class. In turn, Biden frames himself as an underdog “regular Joe,” from a blue-collar town who attended a state university – the antithesis to the corporate elite Trump. In this manner, Biden can shift the target group’s attention away from Biden’s relatively globalized economic policies.

It is important to precede my qualitative discourse analysis by first discussing the pattern I found in Joe Biden’s usage of China rhetoric. This pattern may be reflective of a greater strategy the Biden campaign may have utilized in its effort to gain the voters in key swing states that Hillary Clinton lost in 2016. I found that Biden’s decision to use a particular theme in his China rhetoric corresponded with a certain range in that county’s 2016 margin of victory (MOV). The pattern can more easily be viewed in the following chart.<sup>38</sup>

<b>Audience’s 2016 MOV</b>	<b>Actual Issues/Themes Used by Biden</b>	<b>Expected Issues/Themes to Be Used by Biden</b>
<p>1. Counties where Hillary mostly won with a relatively large MOV:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Toledo, OH; MOV = 17.3</li> <li>● Cleveland, OH; MOV = 35</li> <li>● Milwaukee, WI; MOV = 37.4</li> </ul> <p>A county where Trump won by a slight MOV in his favor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Des Moines, IA; MOV = 7</li> </ul>	<p>Economic Competition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Trump’s trade policies harmed blue-collar workers.</li> <li>● Job insecurity blue-collar workers are currently facing are allegedly caused by China “stealing” jobs.</li> <li>● The U.S. needs to beat China to the new green economy.</li> </ul>	<p>Overall, the actual issues/themes used in these locations and MOVs align with my expectations. Additionally, since the MOVs show a relatively larger quantity of Hillary voters, I also expected an emphasis on international prestige. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● China is moving in to take over the U.S.’ international allies and the U.S.’ “international</li> </ul>

<sup>38</sup> While I found eleven speeches in which Biden mentions China, there are twelve data points reflected in the chart. This is because his speech in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on November 02, 2020 included two themes: Trump’s secret bank account and COVID-19. The two points that represent this speech are those with the MOV of 16.4.

		<p>goodwill” position, exacerbated by Trump’s foreign policy incompetence.</p>
<p>2. Biden mostly used the secret bank account issue/theme in his home state of Pennsylvania, where he could more clearly juxtapose himself (framed as part of the local working class) against Trump’s elite background.</p> <p>Counties where Hillary won:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bucks County, PA; MOV = 0.6</li> <li>● Flint, MI; MOV = 9.5</li> <li>● Pittsburgh, PA; MOV = 16.4</li> </ul> <p>County where Trump won:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Luzerne, PA; MOV = 19.6</li> </ul>	<p>Trump’s Secret Bank Account in China:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Trump pays more taxes in China than he does in the U.S. In other words, Trump is economically disloyal to the U.S.</li> <li>● Trump is an elite (in turn, Biden is a “regular Joe”).</li> </ul>	<p>I expected rhetoric focused on economic competition. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● China has caused the loss of traditional American jobs.</li> <li>● The need to beat China at the new green economy and technology, with an emphasis on the creation of jobs that it will bring back. I expected this rebranding of Biden’s comparatively greener environmental policy since Pennsylvania is home to a lot of fracking.</li> </ul> <p>The frame of the secret bank account was a surprise; however, it makes sense as Biden tries to legitimize his Pennsylvania roots by emphasizing Trump’s outsider elite status and lack of “American loyalty” through a China frame.</p>
<p>3. Counties where Hillary won, but still had a somewhat middling MOV. If he chose to use the COVID-19 frame in a county that significantly swung for Trump in 2016, it’s reasonable to assume they wouldn’t care about COVID-19. If he chose to use this frame that</p>	<p>COVID-19</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Racially tinged rhetoric about the pandemic.</li> <li>● China &amp; Trump knew about the virus, but Trump did nothing about it.</li> <li>● Trump praised President Xi Jinping</li> </ul>	<p>The Pittsburgh, PA location had two frames: the COVID-19 frame and the secret bank account frame (referenced above).</p> <p>Based on how close Chester, PA’s MOV is to the rest of Pittsburgh, PA and that it is still in Pennsylvania, I</p>

<p>overwhelmingly voted for Hillary Clinton, the racially tinged rhetoric would presumably not have been as effective.</p> <p>Counties where Hillary won:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pittsburgh, PA; MOV = 16.4</li> <li>● Chester, PA; MOV = 22</li> </ul>	<p>for his response to the virus in its initial stages.</p>	<p>additionally expected a continuation of the secret bank account frame.</p>
<p>4. Counties where Trump won and where the other themes would not have been effective, including a county that overwhelmingly voted for Trump in comparison to the other counties I studied.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Phoenix, AZ; MOV = 3.4</li> <li>● Johnstown, PA; MOV = 37.7</li> </ul>	<p>Loss of American International Prestige</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Trump and his presidency have caused a downfall in the U.S.’ international prestige.</li> <li>● More people trust and respect the leader of China.</li> </ul>	<p>I was surprised that he mentioned China in Phoenix, Arizona at all. I did not expect Biden to include China in his rhetoric here as Phoenix, AZ is not part of the Rust Belt. Its working-class job sector has not been affected by China in the same way as the other locations included in my analysis. Indeed, upon review of my data, this is the only time he mentions China in Arizona and it is early in his campaign as a confirmed nominee, reflecting perhaps a recognition that rhetoric about China is not most effective in this location with this particular MOV.</p> <p>In Johnstown, PA, I expected Biden to continue signaling at his Pennsylvania roots and emphasizing China in an economic frame. Moreover, I would have expected him to continue using the secret bank account frame in order to show that Trump is aligned and friendly with a country that is “an enemy” to traditional American values.</p>

Within 2016 swing states, the Biden campaign also strategically selected *swing counties* in which to utilize China in Biden's speech rhetoric. This is evident in the range of the margins of victory (MOV) in the counties where Biden discussed China. With the exception of three data points (Johnstown, Cleveland, and Milwaukee), the Biden campaign avoided counties where either Trump or Hillary had an overwhelming majority. The Biden campaign may have understood how futile it would be to try to peel off voters in deep "Trump country" with only a discourse strategy. In addition, the Biden campaign may have understood the risk of using a discourse that was relatively conservative leaning (i.e., the danger of China) in very liberal counties that are not necessarily directly affected by U.S. policies toward China. Thus, upon review of the MOVs within the counties where Biden employed China to peel off voters, it points to the possibility that the Biden campaign selected counties that leaned slightly toward Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election, but were conservative enough that Biden could expect Trump supporters to be in the audience.

More specifically, the margin of victory within the swing counties also potentially played a role in determining which specific theme the Biden campaign would utilize in Biden's speeches. For the first theme, economic competition, it seems that the Biden campaign possibly selected locations that leaned more toward Hillary in 2016 (relative to the other themes' data range). At first glance, the range in the MOVs for this theme may not seem consistent. For example, this theme shows MOVs that are contentious in Trump's favor (-7), middling in Hillary's favor (17.3), and large in Hillary's favor (35 and 37.4). However, upon further consideration, the specific cities he selected all have a commonality: they are home to industries that have been directly, negatively impacted by globalization and China. These cities are collectively home to agricultural and traditional manufacturing industries (e.g., automobile

manufacturing). This also means that they are home to blue-collar workers, potentially in unions, who may have sided with Trump in 2016 despite their long history of voting Democrat. Indeed, Trump was able to win states with strong unions in 2016, sparking concerns among Democrats about election prospects for 2020 in these areas.<sup>39</sup>

The second theme, Trump's secret bank accounts in China, saw the Biden campaign targeting Pennsylvania areas where the MOV was extremely contentious (0.6 in Hillary's favor) to middling in either direction. I will argue later in this thesis that this particular theme was employed by the Biden campaign as a way to establish Biden as a "regular Joe" from a blue-collar town and frame Trump as an economically disloyal corporate elite. (For example, in Luzerne, PA on 10/24/2020, Biden discusses Trump's secret bank account and follows it by declaring, "He thinks Wall Street built this country, but you and I know who really built this country. Families like mine, working people built the middle class and unions built the middle class." By saying this, Biden criticizes Trump's alleged economic elitism and positions himself as someone who represents the working middle class.<sup>40</sup>) By utilizing this particular frame in his home state, in counties whose MOVs were relatively center in 2016 and where he can call upon more specific Pennsylvania blue-collar symbols (e.g., his Pennsylvania childhood, calling his grandfather "grandpop," and mentioning Scranton), Biden could more effectively peel off sympathetic blue-collar 2016 Trump supporters. This frame may not have been as effective in locations like Wisconsin or Ohio where Biden cannot as successfully signal hometown reminiscent symbols to frame himself as a "regular Joe" in comparison to Trump.

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<sup>39</sup> Pa, Alex Leary, and Kris Maher. "Democrats Labor to Stem Flow of Union Voters to Trump." *Wall Street Journal*, 2 Sept. 2019. [www.wsj.com, https://www.wsj.com/articles/democrats-labor-to-stem-flow-of-union-voters-to-trump-11567422002](https://www.wsj.com/articles/democrats-labor-to-stem-flow-of-union-voters-to-trump-11567422002).

<sup>40</sup> "Joe and Jill Biden Campaign in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania." *C-SPAN*, 24 Oct. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?477336-1/joe-jill-biden-campaign-luzerne-county-pennsylvania>.

The third theme is COVID-19. Biden includes rhetoric regarding COVID-19, specifically in relation to China, only twice. The frame within this theme is an accusation of Trump for the COVID-19 pandemic's impact in the U.S., claiming that he knew beforehand how dangerous the virus was when it was still mainly in China, but instead he praised China.<sup>41</sup> The implicit meaning Biden attempts to promote in this frame is that Trump was in league with China to keep the danger of COVID-19 hidden. Both instances of this theme occur in places where the county's MOV was middling in Hillary's favor. I contend that Biden deliberately selected locations with these statistics because he understood the particular political risks of this theme. Discussing COVID-19 in a frame meant to appeal to Trump supporters in places that more clearly favored Trump would be futile or potentially alienating considering the controversiality of COVID-19 among those groups. At the other end, discussing COVID-19 in a conservative frame connecting it to China would alienate more liberal voters who would probably not appreciate its racist implications.

Finally, the fourth theme – the loss of American international prestige – was used by Biden in locations that favored Trump with MOVs at two different extremities: contentious (3.4) and large (37.7). Johnstown, which holds the larger MOV (37.7) from 2016, is in Pennsylvania. However, Biden could not have effectively used the rhetorical strategy here that he used for the secret bank account or COVID-19 frame. Johnstown's 2016 MOV is simply too large in Trump's favor for Biden to reasonably expect that he could peel off Trump supporters with talk about his humble childhood in Pennsylvania or by utilizing COVID-19 in a China frame to discredit Trump's personal loyalties and competence. However, because conservative voters tend to be

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<sup>41</sup> "Joe Biden Campaign Event in Chester, Pennsylvania." *C-SPAN*, 26 Oct. 2020.

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477400-1/joe-biden-campaign-event-chester-pennsylvania>.

"Joe Biden Drive-In Campaign Rally in Pittsburgh." *C-SPAN*, 02 Nov. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477699-1/joe-biden-drive-campaign-rally-pittsburgh>.



more concerned with maintaining U.S. superiority abroad, the Biden campaign may have used this theme in order to mobilize any potentially malleable 2016 Trump supporters.<sup>42</sup> The same argument could potentially hold true in Phoenix, Arizona: 1) the industries in this area are not likely to receive significant direct impact from economic policies toward China, 2) Biden would not be able to use his hometown signaling here, and 3) Phoenix is too conservative (voting for Trump in 2016 with a 3.4 MOV) to use the COVID-19 frame without significant risk. Thus, if using a foreign policy rhetorical frame to peel off Trump supporters, the Biden campaign's best bet may have been to focus on the decline of U.S. prestige abroad.

It is important to note that there do exist potential deviations in the speeches I analyzed where the patterns I have found cannot be applied. In an ideal campaign, the perfect candidate will follow their campaign advisors' and speech writers' suggestions exactly. However, the reality is that candidates may speak "off the cuff" or forget to include particular talking points. In addition, I do not have enough quantitative evidence to prove my hypothesis. With the data I have been able to access, I can only present broad patterns that potentially point to a strategy the Biden campaign may have used.

### ***Economic Competition***

Moving on to the analysis of each theme Biden promoted, the first rhetorical frame I will analyze is economic competition. Specifically, this particular theme included the perception that the U.S. is losing (or in danger of losing) on the international stage because of China's "abuses" and Trump's facilitation of those abuses. While Biden discussed economic competition in four out of eleven (36%) of his China-including speeches, he explicitly mentioned China's alleged

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<sup>42</sup> "America's Global Role, U.S. Superpower Status." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, 5 May 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/05/05/1-americas-global-role-u-s-superpower-status/>.

abuses three times, mainly in the context of trade and American companies sending jobs overseas. He mentioned it twice in Ohio: Cleveland and Toledo.<sup>43</sup> In addition, he mentioned it once in Des Moines, Iowa.<sup>44</sup> In Des Moines, Iowa, for example, Biden claimed, “And let’s not forget how Donald Trump’s weak and chaotic China trade policy has cost farmers and manufacturing so badly... I’ll do what he’s been unable to do. I’ll mobilize the true international effort to stop China’s abuses so we can strengthen manufacturing and farming in Iowa and across the country.”<sup>45</sup> This quote perfectly encapsulates the two main themes in Biden’s economic scapegoat of China: trade (often specifically referring to the decline in American exports) and outsourcing jobs overseas.

In Cleveland, Biden discussed the failure of Trump’s trade policies with China. He cited a statistic which calculates that agricultural exports to China during the Trump years have been 40% lower than during Obama’s second term. (He used the same statistic in Des Moines, Iowa.) In addition, he discussed foreign bankruptcies, general exports, and companies shipping jobs overseas. While these issues are not necessarily linked to China specifically (e.g., companies often ship jobs to Latin America and other Asian countries), Biden framed it as a China issue. He explicitly promised, “My policy is gonna hold China accountable.” The agricultural industry workforce, many of them blue-collar workers, is directly affected by trade policies with China and, thus, has an apprehensive attitude toward China. The Biden campaign recognized this sentiment and effectively scapegoated China in an effort to affirm blue-collar workers’ economic concerns and place himself “on the same side.”

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<sup>43</sup> “Joe Biden Campaigns in Cleveland.” *C-SPAN*, 02 Nov. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477702-1/joe-biden-campaigns-cleveland>.

“Joe Biden Remarks Canvas Kick Off Event Near Pittsburgh.” *C-SPAN*, 02 Nov. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477703-1/joe-biden-remarks-canvas-kick-event-pittsburgh>.

<sup>44</sup> “Joe Biden Remarks at Drive-In Campaign Rally in Des Moines, Iowa.” *C-SPAN*, 30 Oct. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477601-1/joe-biden-campaigns-des-moines-iowa>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

In addition, Biden similarly addressed the automobile industry with essentially the same frame. The Biden campaign recognized the decline in the automobile industry and political stances it has fostered among that particular section of blue-collar workers. The Democratic Party, including Biden, arguably represent the perceived causes for the industry's decline: globalization, new technology, and a call for economic policies that prioritize the fight against climate change. All of these concepts negatively affect traditional blue-collar occupations, including automobile manufacturing. Therefore, the emergence of the electric vehicle industry is bound to create anxiety regarding job security and, thus, create a disincentive to vote for a candidate that is in support of fighting climate change by shifting to electric and renewable energy. Biden most likely understood this employment insecurity dilemma, which has probably been further exacerbated by the unemployment rate spike caused by the pandemic.<sup>46</sup>

Biden steered the audience's attention away from conceptualizing their increasing job insecurity as a matter of Democrat climate change policies and a rising emphasis on new technology (especially electric). (In a poll from November 2016, 49% of Trump voters said that transitioning from fossil fuels toward clean energy will reduce economic growth and cost jobs, compared to 29% who said that such a transition would improve economic growth and provide new jobs.<sup>47</sup>) Instead, he pushed the audience to conceptualize it as China trying to beat us at reaching new technology and its accompanying market (i.e., new jobs). He declared, "Folks, if we don't act, China is gonna own the market. China is gonna own it all and we will act."<sup>48</sup> In this

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<sup>46</sup> "Tracking the COVID-19 Economy's Effect on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 10 Feb. 2022, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and-employment>.

<sup>47</sup> Leiserowitz, Anthony, et al. *Trump Voters & Global Warming*. Yale University and George Mason University, 2017, <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Trump-Voters-and-Global-Warming.pdf>, pp. 9.

<sup>48</sup> "Joe Biden Campaigns in Cleveland." *C-SPAN*, 02 Nov. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?477702-1/joe-biden-campaigns-cleveland>.

manner, Biden additionally shapes his rhetoric to foster a sense of competitiveness among the audience that would hopefully lead to feelings of efficacy, which would then translate to the ballot. He pursued this goal in Toledo, OH as well by saying, “I promise you I will stand up to China’s trade abuses. I will invest in the American worker because I know no one, nobody [can] compete [with] an American worker when [Americans have] gotten a fair shot... I will step up and I will expand capacity so the United States, not China, leads the world in modern new technology.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, Biden possibly attempted to mitigate blue-collar workers’ opposition to voting for a liberal candidate by deliberately turning to Trump’s foreign policy and China as the causes for their economic insecurity. In addition, his rhetoric simultaneously moved away from the need to stop climate change as the motivator for shifting to renewable energy in the automobile industry. By framing it into a competition with China to dominate the emerging market and once again make the U.S. the capital of automobile manufacturing, Biden thus concurrently placed Trump as an incompetent commander in chief, deemphasized his own climate change policy proposals (which would inevitably negatively impact traditional manufacturing industries), and attempted to rouse a competitive spirit in manufacturing workers to “defeat” China, hopefully effectively mobilizing them to vote for him over Trump.

Connecting Biden’s rhetoric to the existing literature, Biden’s economic competition rhetoric does partly align with previous arguments. The first argument Biden’s rhetoric somewhat aligns with is the argument presented by Albertson and Kushner in *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*. According to their argument, candidates deliberately frame threats in a particular manner that rouses feelings of anxiety while also

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<sup>49</sup> “Joe Biden Delivers Remarks in Toledo on the Economy.” *C-SPAN*, 12 Oct. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?476873-1/joe-biden-delivers-remarks-toledo-economy>.

promoting a sense of efficacy, which can translate to the ballot box. Biden does rouse feelings of anxiety by claiming that China will take over the new electric technology and the job market that comes with it. According to Biden's anxiety-tinged rhetoric, China will be the new world leader of technological innovation if individuals do not vote for him. However, unlike the argument Albertson and Kushner present, which contends that candidates deliberately foster anxiety among voters in order to mobilize them, Biden may be simply taking advantage of an anxiety that already exists. Like I mentioned earlier, blue-collar workers in areas marked by industry decline and increasing job insecurity already understandably face anxiety regarding their economic situation and prospects. Thus, rather than foster a new sense of anxiety, Biden simply magnified an already existing anxiety and crafted it toward his favor.

The second argument Biden's rhetoric aligns with is the argument that presidential candidates, particularly Democratic candidates, craft their rhetoric to position themselves as hardliners and posit their opponent as "weak."<sup>50</sup> However, the previous literature has mainly had a focus on candidates doing this within a military context and have focused less on this tactic being used in an economic context as is the case in Biden's 2020 campaign rhetoric. The third argument that the previous literature claims is that presidential candidates attempt to discredit the incumbent's competence as a commander in chief.<sup>51</sup> Biden did attempt that in Des Moines by saying, "I'll do what [Trump's] unable to do. I'll mobilize the true international effort to stop China's abuses so we can strengthen manufacturing and farming in Iowa and across the country. I'm gonna hold China accountable, which he hasn't."

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<sup>50</sup> Kane, John V., and Helmut Norpoth. "No Love for Doves? Foreign Policy and Candidate Appeal." *Social Science Quarterly*, v. 98, n. 5. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/ssqu.12377>, pp. 1660.

<sup>51</sup> Armacost, Michael H. *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections*, pp. 106.

However, Biden's rhetoric within this theme also extends beyond the existing literature with regards to the latter two arguments. While scapegoating China, Biden simultaneously pushed the implicit argument that Trump is in league with China. For example, in Toledo, Ohio, Biden specifically discussed companies sending jobs overseas and his plan to incentivize companies to bring those jobs back through taxes.<sup>52</sup> He placed Trump as a target for blame due to his trade war with China, "We will end Trump's new incentive for sending jobs abroad and that is what he has done... We will make a trade to fight for every American worker... not Trump's trade war, erratic tweets and bluster..." While at first glance this would support the existing literatures' argument that presidential candidates scapegoat the incumbent's incompetence as commander in chief in order to frame themselves as hardliners, Biden still goes a step further.<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that Biden also claimed that Trump *deliberately* incentivized jobs being sent abroad with his policies. Thus, Biden simultaneously pushed forth two narratives. The first narrative: the traditional one of an incompetent, weak incumbent (which the existing literature commonly contends). The second narrative: Trump is deliberately undermining the success of the blue-collar worker.

### ***Donald Trump's Secret Bank Account in China***

The second theme Biden commonly used in his China rhetoric was Trump's "secret" bank account in China. He repeatedly highlighted that Donald Trump has paid more taxes in China than he has in the United States.<sup>54</sup> Biden mentioned Trump's so-called secret bank account

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<sup>52</sup> "Joe Biden Delivers Remarks in Toledo on the Economy." *C-SPAN*, 12 Oct. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?476873-1/joe-biden-delivers-remarks-toledo-economy>.

<sup>53</sup> Armacost, Michael H. *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>54</sup> McIntire, Mike, et al. "Trump Records Shed New Light on Chinese Business Pursuits." *The New York Times*, 20 Oct. 2020. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/us/trump-taxes-china.html>.

in China in four of the eleven speeches (approximately 36%) where he included China in his rhetoric. The general line Biden typically used was, Trump “has a secret bank account in China. He paid fifty times more taxes in Beijing than he has paid in the United States.”<sup>55</sup> The existing literature argues that presidential candidates weaponize foreign policy issues in an effort to discredit the incumbent as a competent commander-in-chief.<sup>56</sup> However, the manner in which Biden discredits Trump with this particular frame has less to do with presidential competency. It has more to do with his personal character and loyalties. Throughout his campaign and presidency Trump repeatedly portrayed himself as “tough on China.” However, by emphasizing Trump’s Chinese bank account and tax record, Biden presented to blue-collar voters a version of Trump that is conniving and economically disloyal to the United States.

Biden’s objective with this particular rhetorical frame may have been to position Trump as an elite, which is starkly different to how Trump framed himself during his 2016 presidential campaign (i.e., an outsider who wanted to “drain the swamp”).<sup>57</sup> To further highlight Trump as an elite, Biden usually accompanied the bank account theme in his China rhetoric with a blurb about how he grew up with “guys like Trump.” By this he means individuals who were rich, who had “inherited everything they have ever gotten,” and looked down on blue-collar people like Biden.<sup>58</sup> He further framed himself as a non-elite in comparison to Trump by citing that if he were to win, he would be the first president in a long time who had not attended an Ivy League university. Thus, by including this anecdotal information with the rhetoric regarding Trump’s

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<sup>55</sup> “Joe Biden and Former President Obama Campaign in Flint, Michigan.” *C-SPAN*, 31 Oct. 2020,

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?477558-1/joe-biden-president-obama-campaign-flint-michigan>.

<sup>56</sup> Armacost, Michael H. *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections*, pp. 106-108.

<sup>57</sup> Hughes, Trevor. “Trump Calls to ‘Drain the Swamp’ of Washington.” *USA TODAY*, 18 Oct. 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/10/18/donald-trump-rally-colorado-springs-ethics-lobbying-limitations/92377656/>.

<sup>58</sup> “Joe Biden Campaign Remarks in Wisconsin.” *C-SPAN*, 21 Sep. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?476047-1/joe-biden-criticizes-president-trumps-coronavirus-pandemic-response>.

account and taxes in China, Biden effectively frames Trump as someone who looks down on the working class, evades contributing his share like a Wall Street elite (an additional imagery Biden commonly employed), and who owes a higher level of loyalty to China. In this manner, Biden possibly utilized this particular China frame to plant a seed of doubt among blue-collar Trump supporters in the audience as to which side Trump is on personally and, by extension, politically. This differs from the existing literature, which does not consider the possibility that presidential candidates may use foreign policy to also discredit an incumbent's personal character.

### ***COVID-19***

The third major theme present in Biden's rhetoric of China is COVID-19. He places China in a COVID-19 frame twice: once in Chester, PA (on 10/26/2020) and in Pittsburgh, PA (on 11/02/2020).<sup>59</sup> In Chester, he specifically discussed Trump's poor and delayed response to COVID in China at the beginning of the outbreak, "We had 34 people in China. And to the best of our knowledge, he never asked them to go to Wuhan to figure out... how bad the situation was." He emphasizes the same discourse again in Pittsburgh, "The president, he knew in January how bad this virus was. In January. He knew it... he got intelligence briefings laying out how dangerous it was coming from China and where it was happening. And he said no, he didn't read his intelligence." Furthermore, in Chester, Biden again frames Trump as being not only weak, but *friendly* toward China, "And remember, he was praising the president of China, President Xi." Again, Biden strategically discussed China in a particular frame that would allow him to

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<sup>59</sup> "Joe Biden Campaign Event in Chester, Pennsylvania." *C-SPAN*, 26 Oct. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?477400-1/joe-biden-campaign-event-chester-pennsylvania>.  
"Joe Biden Drive-In Campaign Rally in Pittsburgh." *C-SPAN*, 02 Nov. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?477699-1/joe-biden-drive-campaign-rally-pittsburgh>.



target Trump's personal loyalties because Biden possibly understood it would be difficult to peel off Trump supporters if he approached them with talk about policies.

Furthermore, the Biden campaign may have understood this particular frame had the potential to be detrimental if used with the incorrect audience. These two campaign events were the only instances in my data where Biden included COVID-19 in his China rhetoric. (Biden did discuss COVID-19 repeatedly in other instances where he *does not* mention China mainly in a frame akin to wartime rhetoric.) Both campaign events were in areas where Hillary had a middling to large lead in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.<sup>60</sup> I contend that Biden did not mention China, especially in the context of COVID-19, in counties where Trump had a major margin of victory. Regarding the China-COVID frame, COVID-19 is an alienating issue among Trump supporters. Discussing it in a frame that would appeal to Democrats (i.e., masking, vaccine rates, health risks, etc.) would have potentially turned off any Trump supporters that Biden was trying to sway his way via a China discourse. On the other hand, Biden also did not mention China in relation to COVID-19 in places where Hillary had a relatively large margin of victory. For example, he did not mention it in Cleveland, Ohio on 11/02/2020, despite the fact that he *did* include China in his rhetoric with different framing at that same event. He also did not use a China-COVID rhetoric in Cleveland, even though he utilized the China-COVID framing the same day in Pittsburgh (mentioned earlier in this section).

Biden possibly did not utilize the China-COVID frame in counties where Hillary had a major margin of victory because Biden had a reasonable level of expectation that the audience at those campaign events would be more left-leaning on the political spectrum. Discussing COVID-19 in connection to China would most likely not have boded well among more liberal

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<sup>60</sup> "Pennsylvania Election Results 2016: President Live Map by County, Real-Time Voting Updates." *Election Hub*, 13 Dec. 2016, <https://west.ops.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/pennsylvania/>.

voters, due to the layer of racism such rhetoric implies. Indeed, the Biden campaign had come under fire earlier in the year for utilizing similar rhetoric in a campaign ad.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the Biden campaign potentially deliberately selected swing counties that had voted for Hillary in 2016 with a middling to large margin of victory, which would allow him to discuss COVID-19 within a China frame to sway any Trump supporters, without alienating more liberal voters who were likely to be less tolerant of such racially charged rhetoric.

### *Loss of American International Prestige*

The fourth theme Biden incorporated into his China rhetoric is the alleged loss of the U.S.' prestige abroad. This usage of foreign policy rhetoric is partly in line with Armacost's argument that presidential candidates employ the concept of declining American prestige abroad to mobilize voters.<sup>62</sup> For example, in his speech on October 8, 2020 in Phoenix, Arizona, Biden precedes his *explicit* mention of China by discussing the U.S.' military strength.<sup>63</sup> He declared, "We have the most powerful military in the history of the world." Subsequently, though, Biden lamented that despite the U.S.' great military strength, respect for the U.S. on the international stage is in decline. He continued, "Seventeen major countries in the world [were asked] what leaders they admire and trust the most. Do you know what they say? More people trusted the leader of China and Putin of Russia than the president of the United States." Similarly, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania on 09/30/2020, Biden said, "Donald Trump is less respected than President Xi and Putin."<sup>64</sup> By specifying that the specific target for this lack of respect is the

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<sup>61</sup> Toosi, Nahal. "Biden Ad Exposes a Rift over China on the Left." *POLITICO*, 23 Apr. 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/23/biden-ad-exposes-left-rift-china-202241>.

<sup>62</sup> Armacost, Michael H. *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections*, pp. 108.

<sup>63</sup> "Joe Biden and Senator Harris Campaign in Arizona." *C-SPAN*, 08 Oct. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?476759-1/joe-biden-senator-harris-campaign-arizona>.

<sup>64</sup> "Joe Biden Campaign Remarks in Johnstown, Pennsylvania." *C-SPAN*, 30 Sep. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?476408-101/joe-biden-campaign-remarks-johnstown-pennsylvania>.

presidency, Biden signaled to the audience that Trump was the reason for the loss in the U.S.’ prestige.

(Furthermore, in Pittsburgh, PA on November 2, 2020, he emphasized the U.S.’ social status abroad again and its deficit in comparison with the U.S.’ international military superiority. While Biden did not explicitly name “China,” Biden claimed that no one can match the U.S., not even “Asia.”<sup>65</sup> I contend that it is reasonable to assume Biden implicitly meant China. He subsequently continued to specifically blame Trump for this downfall by saying, “We’re a laughingstock around the world right now. The only thing that can tear America apart is America itself. And that’s exactly what Donald Trump has been doing since the beginning of his campaign.” Because Biden did not explicitly name China, I did not add this to my chart as an instance where Biden includes China in his rhetoric. Nevertheless, I believe this particular speech merited further review because of the China-adjacent frame Biden used regarding U.S. international prestige.)

The manner in which Biden specifically included American international prestige in his China rhetoric, however, differs from the argument that Armacost presents. In the examples Armacost’s arguments offer, the presidential candidates cite specific foreign policies that the incumbent took on that supposedly caused American international prestige to decline. For example, then-candidate John F. Kennedy complained that President Dwight Eisenhower's containment policies needed to be escalated to protect the U.S.’ prestige. Biden, on the other hand, maintained the focus on Trump himself and his presidency, rather than Trump’s specific foreign policies. Similar to the implicit purpose in using the economic competition and secret

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<sup>65</sup> “Joe Biden Drive-In Campaign Rally in Pittsburgh.” *C-SPAN*, 02 Nov. 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?477699-1/joe-biden-drive-campaign-rally-pittsburgh>.

bank account themes, in this theme Biden was possibly also attempting to plant doubt among Trump supporters regarding Trump's personal competence and loyalties as president.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while I could not quantitatively prove my hypothesis (which states that Biden deliberately framed China as a threat in his rhetoric to appeal to the blue-collar workers that Trump won in 2016), I believe my thesis sheds light on a potential pattern that has emerged in presidential candidates' rhetoric in recent years. It is widely recognized in U.S. political and electoral research that the American political spectrum has grown increasingly polarized in the past decade. Thus, split-ticket voting may become less frequent, forcing (presidential) candidates to find new avenues via which they can attract voters outside of their party's stronghold to ensure an electoral victory. I argue that, in a political climate where most domestic issues have now become a hot button topic, candidates have turned to foreign policy to establish a common "enemy" with which they can rally a base among voters that would otherwise vote for the candidate's opponent. While including foreign policy in campaign rhetoric is not a new phenomenon, the manner in which Biden included it differs from what the existing literature covers.

By analyzing the specific frames Biden attached to his China rhetoric and the specific audience that he presented his rhetoric to, my research highlights the gaps in the existing literature about presidential candidates' use of foreign policy. Much of the literature I reviewed in my thesis focused on presidential candidates using foreign policy in their rhetoric to affirm their own existing political bases (e.g., Armacost and Paterson). There is a lack of research studying how foreign policy rhetoric is used to cater to voters specifically from *outside* of the

candidate's usual political base, while simultaneously and deliberately de-emphasizing the usual foreign policy rhetorical frames candidates will utilize when the audience mainly consists of their confirmed voter base. On the other hand, when the literature *does* include voters outside of the candidate's political base into its argument (e.g., Kane and Norpoth, Mercieca and Vaughn, and Albertson and Kushner), it conceptualizes those voters as part of a broad, national audience, rather than an independent entity. Or, if the election has an incumbent, the candidate's foreign policy rhetoric places the incumbent's incompetence as the main scapegoat to be blamed. The literature does not consider that candidates may be crafting a foreign policy rhetoric *specifically* for an audience outside of their political base, a rhetoric that would not appeal to the typical voter from their base or to the broad national audience.

The 2016 U.S. presidential election exposed the widening chasm in political beliefs between the two mainstream American political parties. In addition, it exposed the dangers of taking certain groups (i.e., blue-collar workers, particularly in the Rust Belt) for granted, leaving them disgruntled and receptive to the opponent to swoop in to self-posit as the candidate who will listen to their needs. Therefore, with the aforementioned two developments exposed in the 2016 election, subsequent candidates like Biden may have recognized that finding a common ground may be limited to emphasizing foreign policy and finding a "common enemy" or scapegoat there. Moreover, when including Trump in his foreign policy rhetoric, instead of solely focusing on Trump's incompetence (as the current literature would lead one to believe), Biden frames Trump in an ally-adjacent position to the "common enemy": China. The argument that candidates will frame incumbents as being in league with the foreign scapegoat is also notably absent from the current literature, perhaps because it is a recent development. My thesis

hopefully reveals the gaps in the present research and highlights the above implications for future study.

Scholars who are pursuing this line of inquiry should investigate presidential candidates' foreign policy rhetoric and how the frames they utilize may differ based on the audiences they are speaking to. The sources for data to pursue this research will probably come from the transcripts of presidential candidates' speeches when they speak to audiences in swing states. Moreover, researchers will have to study voting patterns that run deeper than MOVs to be able to plausibly categorize the audience present at the candidate's campaign event. Researchers should also study how candidates frame other foreign policy issues, apart from China. Finally, there may also be value in studying how a candidate's rhetoric on the foreign policy issue differs once they are elected and have to address a broader, national audience. Overall, based on the points highlighted in my analysis, the current polarized domestic political climate and the ever-increasing globalized context of the U.S. presidency will increase the need for political science scholars to further study the use of foreign policy rhetoric during the presidential campaigning process and what that possible recent phenomenon entails for how presidential candidates will have to reconceptualize their presidential campaign strategies.

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