

The Populist Politician's Playbook: A Qualitative Study of Senator Mike Lee's Facebook Posts

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Abstract

This study examines how Utah Senator Mike Lee employs agenda-setting strategies on Facebook to cultivate a populist political identity. Using a qualitative content analysis of 2,250 social media posts from 2010, 2016, and 2022, the research explores how Lee crafts his messages to resonate with a local constituency that values constitutional originalism and distrusts federal authority. Guided by agenda-setting theory—particularly the attribute agenda-setting framework—the study identifies three key themes: citizen testimonials, critiques of federal policy, and appeals to constitutional knowledge. These themes reveal how Lee's rhetoric aligns with populist strategies, including personalization, audience-specific digital literacy, and the framing of elite opposition. The findings suggest that social media enables politicians like Lee to bypass traditional media, reinforce voter trust, and adapt messages in response to public sentiment. This case contributes to a broader understanding of how local populist politicians leverage social media to maintain political relevance and power.

Keywords: populism, agenda-setting theory, social media, political communication, Mike Lee

Mike Lee, a senator from Utah, entered office in 2010 with a clear policy agenda that he had articulated during his campaign: "As your Senator I will work tirelessly, every day, to fight for the values we hold dear" (Lee, 2010c). He gained office during the height of the "Tea Party" movement, which emphasized limited government, fiscal conservatism, and a return to constitutional principles (Zernike, 2010). Before his election, Lee had built a strong legal background, clerking for Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, serving as an assistant U.S. attorney, and working as general counsel to the Utah governor. He earned both his bachelor's degree in political science and Juris Doctorate from Brigham Young University (Mike Lee for Senate, n.d.).

Lee's rise to political prominence coincided with growing public frustration following the 2008 financial crisis. Many Americans felt abandoned by political elites after the federal government bailed out major banks, leaving everyday citizens to endure the consequences of the recession. In Utah, this discontent manifested as support for candidates like Lee, who vowed to rein in government spending and uphold the Constitution. His grassroots appeal helped him defeat longtime Senator Bob Bennett in the Republican primary and secure a general election victory with 61% of the vote (Deseret News, 2010).

Lee's campaign and political messaging demonstrate characteristics of populism, a political style that frames society as divided

between a virtuous, ordinary public and a corrupt elite (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Urbinati, 2019). As a populist, Lee presents himself as a representative of the "common man," directly engaging with Utahns who feel unheard by establishment figures. His rhetoric emphasizes fiscal responsibility, distrust of federal overreach, and fidelity to constitutional principles—all of which resonate deeply with conservative voters in his state.

Understanding the communicative strategies of populist politicians like Lee is critical to grasping how certain political issues gain traction among voters. This study explores how agenda-setting theory applies not just to mass media but also to individual political actors using social media. Agenda-setting theory posits that media outlets do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about, by highlighting specific issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the era of social media, this theory has evolved to encompass the way politicians themselves can shape public discourse through direct communication channels.

Social media has transformed the way citizens engage with politics. Traditional gatekeeping structures, such as newspapers and television news, no longer serve as the primary mode of political communication for many Americans. Instead, platforms like Facebook allow politicians to communicate directly with constituents, bypassing journalistic filters and fostering a sense of personal connection (Naser, 2020). For populist politicians, this direct communication reinforces their image as authentic representatives of the people, unmediated by elite institutions.

Senator Lee's use of Facebook illustrates this dynamic. His social media presence is not aimed at gaining national attention but at cultivating a local following. This localized focus makes him an ideal subject for analyzing how politicians craft and adapt messages to resonate with their constituencies over time. Lee's posts are strategically curated to align with his audience's values, highlight his accessibility, and portray him as an everyday Utahn who shares their concerns.

Tripodi (2022) describes the "populist politician's playbook" as consisting of three strategies: knowing the audience, engaging with the audience's form of digital literacy, and delivering messages that the audience wants to hear. Lee exemplifies all three. He hosts in-person town halls, maintains a consistent online presence, and tailors his messaging to Utah's conservative base. His ability to connect with voters both online and offline strengthens his populist brand and reinforces his political

longevity.

This study analyzes Mike Lee's Facebook posts during his first campaign in 2010, his reelection in 2016, and his most recent campaign in 2022 to trace how his messages have evolved over time. By applying the framework of agenda-setting theory—specifically the attribute agenda-setting model—this research investigates how Lee highlights certain issues and frames them to resonate with his audience. His case offers a valuable lens through which to understand the broader phenomenon of populist communication in local and national politics.

Literature Review

Knowing how a populist politician's playbook works can help researchers study how certain issues become more pressing for voters. By researching agenda-setting theory and how it applies to the individual politician, this study will help show how social media has become a tool to spread the agenda set by people, the media, and politicians.

Agenda-setting theory attempts to explain the transfer of issue salience through mass media messages (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In essence, the media sets the agenda for the public to think about certain issues. Since that time, multiple studies have been conducted about the effects of this theory. Other studies into this theory have looked at the attributes that cause a change in issue salience, or the psychology of the theory (McCombs, 2005). However, new media has appeared and researchers are questioning if the theory still applies. This new media includes blogs, social media, and forums. Anything that the internet touches can be turned into a mass media channel. Those researchers have found that the theory still can be defended even though the technology may have changed.

Agenda-setting Theory in Social Media

Choosing entertainment over the news, and having fewer chances of unwittingly picking up on a news story, has caused audiences to be fragmented (Prior, 2007). People are no longer being exposed to political information inadvertently like a quick news headline during commercials while watching television. Being able to choose what entertainment channels each individual enjoys has made political participation among voters decrease over the years. Most people are content to be entertained rather than look into the issues deeply. This makes it difficult for the media to influence what issues voters need to be made aware of.

However, social media has taken on the role of influence in people's lives. It has a way of shaping opinions and influencing the

public agenda. In Feezell's (2018) study, she demonstrates through her research that social media has taken over that agenda-setting role. Participants were asked about what they saw as political issues. During the study's timeframe, participants were exposed to certain political issues and then asked at the end of the study about those issues. Those issues increased in importance for the members of this study. Social media distributed news stories in the group's social media feed. While some didn't click on the news story, the political issue did become more important.

Another recent study showed that a public agenda feeds the media agenda, the media agenda feeds the political agenda, and the political agenda feeds the public agenda (Gilardi et al., 2022). The researchers looked at three different ways in which social media influenced these agendas. The first was the traditional media agenda that the original theory was constructed on. Second was how political parties use social media to adjust the issue salience. Lastly, how politicians use social media to move their issues up in importance. The scholars concluded that agenda-setting is a complex relationship between all three. Each group was able to influence the other, even the traditional media so many thoughts were being reduced to obscurity. Social media has become a counterbalance to other forms of media and a great deal of study is needed to find how agenda-setting influences the political agenda.

Though traditional agenda-setting effects might disappear, agenda-setting in the social media space will remain enduring for the foreseeable future. It has become a place unlike any in history to influence the outcome of politics and communities. Multiple studies have researched this new phenomenon and its impacts on agenda-setting theory (Ritter, 2020; Russell-Neuman et al., 2014; Shafi, 2017). All have come to similar conclusions that traditional media is being phased out and social media is now taking on the role as the tool to set the public agenda.

Agenda-setting Theory in a Populist Movement

Though social media has become a boon to the public and politicians to set the public agenda, one particular political group has taken advantage of these tools. The populist politician can appear more authentic and thus more trustworthy. The populist movement started to become popular around the financial crisis (Zernike, 2010). At the same time, social media started to become popular because smartphones became ubiquitous (Pew Research Center, 2019). In so doing, this has helped spread the ideas that were once considered not appropriate for political communication (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Even the discussion of populism brings

up derogatory opinions from the media. Yet with the research into populism and social media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), it has been found that populist politicians appear authentic in their message. This discovery, coupled with changing minds toward this political style (Calhoun, 1988), has brought about an interesting dynamic in the communication world, a change in agenda-setting authority.

In their research, Enli and Rosenberg (2018) found that traditional media makes politicians less trustworthy than if they spread their message in social media or opinion pieces. The younger voters are also in a paradox where they trust politicians more on social media than those in traditional media but also are skeptical of politicians using social media. The paradox was explained as young voters are more skeptical because of the polarization in politics but that is a future study. Their study concluded that politicians appear more authentic when using social media. Media trust and political trust are highly interrelated and a populist movement gains followers because of this trust in the medium they use.

One researcher studied how the 'alt-right' and 'alt-left' populist groups use 'hyperpartisan news' to, in essence, set the public agenda on issues they are concerned about (Rae, 2021). This study demonstrated that legacy media no longer holds the authority to set the public agenda. Populist politicians use hyperpartisan news articles as proof of what issues are more important. They also attack traditional news companies as not being authentic or attempting to hide the truth. Issues that didn't seem important have increased in importance over the last few years. Understanding how the media landscape is continuing to change can help researchers with future studies.

Research Questions

Knowing how a populist politician's playbook works can help researchers study how certain issues become more pressing for voters. By researching this through agenda-setting theory and how that applies to the individual politician, this study will help show how social media has become a tool to spread the agenda set by people, the media, and politicians. Social media has changed the way people consume news. Interacting with politicians is more direct and not necessarily only through broadcast journalism. There are now individuals who can capture the attention of millions of viewers and change the agenda quickly. This study will perform qualitative research on the following questions:

RQ1: What were Mike Lee's original messages during his first term?

RQ2: How has Mike Lee's messages changed since being in office based on the public setting the agenda?

Method

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of public Facebook posts made by Senator Mike Lee to explore how he uses social media to communicate and prioritize political issues. The goal was to understand how a populist politician leverages social media to align with voter sentiment and shape public discourse through agenda-setting strategies.

The study is grounded in agenda-setting theory, which posits that media influences the public by telling them what to think about, rather than what to think (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Specifically, this research uses the attribute agenda-setting model, which distinguishes between two levels of salience: objects (the issues themselves) and attributes (the characteristics or framing of those issues) (McCombs, 2005; Weaver et al., 2004). This framework provides a lens to examine not just which topics Lee emphasizes, but how he frames them to resonate with his audience.

For example, the object may be "taxation," while the attribute could be framed as "reducing crime" rather than "increasing law enforcement funding," a distinction known to influence public response (Luntz, 2007). Applying this two-level framework allowed the researcher to identify how Lee crafted his messages to appeal to specific values held by Utah voters.

The dataset consisted of 2,250 public posts from Senator Lee's official campaign Facebook page, collected during three key election cycles: January–November 2010, January–November 2016, and January–November 2022. These periods represent Lee's initial campaign, his first reelection, and his most recent campaign, offering a longitudinal view of how his communication evolved.

Posts were first coded based on the object level—what issue was being discussed. Coding categories were derived from the 2016 Republican Party Platform (Republican National Committee, 2016), including themes such as economic policy, federal land use, constitutional rights, and healthcare. These object categories were validated by comparing them to Lee's voting record using The Heritage Foundation scorecard (Heritage Action for America, n.d.), ensuring alignment between public messaging and legislative behavior.

After object-level coding, posts were analyzed for attributes—how those issues were framed.

These attributes were grouped thematically, focusing on linguistic and rhetorical strategies Lee used to emphasize particular aspects of each issue. While external validation of attribute coding was limited, Google Trends (Google, n.d.) was used to observe whether certain issue framings gained traction among Utah users, offering modest support for interpretation.

Although triangulation was used to strengthen object-level coding, attribute coding posed more challenges due to the subjective nature of interpretation. The use of the Republican Platform as the basis for coding may have also introduced partisan bias, limiting the scope to conservative terminology and perspectives. Furthermore, the study only analyzed Facebook, which may not capture the full spectrum of Senator Lee's communication strategy across other platforms or media.

Nonetheless, the depth and volume of posts provide rich insight into how Lee has tailored his messages over time. The application of attribute agenda-setting theory helps illuminate how populist politicians influence public perception—not only by emphasizing certain issues but by strategically framing them to match constituent values and fears (McCombs, 2005).

Analysis

The social media posts that were reviewed show consistency in how Senator Lee uses Facebook to communicate with voters. Three main themes emerged from Mike Lee's posts: testimonials, harmful federal government policies, and constitutional knowledge. Each of these themes assists in gaining more insights into a populist politician's playbook in knowing the audience, engaging with the audience's form of digital literacy, and giving that audience what they want to hear (Tripodi, 2022).

The first major theme is the testimonials given, either by other people or by Mike Lee himself. These are people in the state who have met Mike Lee and are giving their opinions on various topics that Senator Lee has done as a Senator or in his life. These are mainly from voters who are not well known. For example, Terry Findley wanted people to know why Mike Lee had their vote:

He believes in the Constitution. He knows the Constitution better than any individual in Congress, and to me, that's the single most important issue that we have right now is getting leaders that understand the Constitution. - Terry Findley. (Lee, 2022c)

This shows that similar testimonials are usually about Mike Lee following the Constitution

during his later campaigns. Having people who are not in politics and appear to be leading everyday lives shows that Mike Lee cares about those people. Other testimonials include Mike Lee showing images of him interacting with several people listening to him. Showing that he cares about the everyday citizens in Utah goes a long way. Then he can post the following, “The people of San Juan County have a voice! It is clear they do not want the Bears Ears monument” (Lee, 2016b).

The second theme that stands out is the near-constant posts about harmful federal policies. Utah voters see the federal government in a bad light and something not to be trusted (Pignanelli & Webb, 2019). This theme demonstrates that speaking ill of the federal government helps a candidate to gain popularity. In a social media post, Mike Lee stated “It seems the farther away from D.C., the more federal government owns more land, making a financial dent to rural counties. Tell me, how do you see Utah’s federal-owned land being managed going forward” (Lee, 2016a). The social media post demonstrates that Senator Lee is keeping the public agenda about federal land in Utah top of mind for the voters. It is one thing that is fearful for people in Utah who, as mentioned previously, don’t trust the federal government to manage things from so far away. This example exhibits another policy considered to be harmful:

My critics say I vote no and hold bills too often. But I vote no and hold bills because I understand that Washington has a spending problem. Government is too big, too expensive, and doing too many things it was never intended to do, and we see inflation as a natural result of that. We must establish a future that avoids crippling debt and allows our grandchildren to thrive. (Lee, 2022b)

Finances are important to people in Utah (McCann, 2018; Pignanelli & Webb, 2023). Seeing how the federal government continues to make, what voters in Utah consider, bad policy around taxpayer money sets the public agenda for Mike Lee.

The last theme is Mike Lee’s constitutional knowledge. The senator prides himself on his knowledge of the United States Constitution. This theme is established throughout the social media posts. One of the earlier posts states “Speaking on freedom and the Constitution at UVU” (Lee, 2010b). As well as asking children to write an essay about the Constitution for a contest (Lee, 2010a). Mike Lee (2022a) believes that all Americans should know the Constitution like him but without bragging:

It’s absolutely essential that every American read, comprehend, understand, and apply the Constitution. I carry a copy everywhere I go to remind me of the promises I made to protect and defend it. When we restrict government through the Constitution, we unlock unlimited human potential. We allow American families to do what they do best: to work hard, provide for their families, and thrive. (2022a)

By continually being a politician who speaks about the United States Constitution, he has shown that he understands what needs to be done at the federal level. Continuing discussions about the Constitution help solidify this view that Mike Lee is a politician defending the Constitution.

Discussion

This research has identified the three themes extracted from Mike Lee’s social media posts: testimonials, harmful federal government policies, and constitutional knowledge. Studying these themes can help clarify what populist politicians utilize to gain support. Though “populism” doesn’t have a direct definition, it has been conceptualized as a political style that is open for further discussion (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). These themes help with this discussion as well as lead to the populist playbook about knowing the audience, engaging with the audience’s form of digital literacy, and giving that audience what they want to hear.

In the first theme, the testimonials from others and showing Mike Lee listening to voters is a key finding. This demonstrates that a politician cares about what the voters want. Having these particular social media posts allows others to see that they can speak to the senator. This is used by other populist politicians to get to know their audience better. Being able to know the audience helps establish credibility as a politician of the people. The comments on the posts allow Mike Lee to tailor his message to the audience as well. Being able to discuss in real-time with constituents the issues they feel they have. Senator Lee gets to know his audience through social media.

Mike Lee’s strategy revolves around engaging the audience with the digital literacy they are comfortable utilizing. Facebook has been a great source of information as a newer medium in 2010. The senator has used this same medium for over 12 years. Most older generations use Facebook (or Instagram) while younger generations do not use it as frequently (Sheldon et al., 2021). This shows that Mike Lee is engaging with an older audience through a comfortable form of literacy that older

generations are expecting. He is not trying to use the newer platforms that younger voters use. The targeted audience is on the platform that Mike Lee uses.

After hearing more about the issues and policies of the Utah voters, Mike Lee's message became part of his policy agenda. He cannot only tailor it but also expand the message to include other issues. However, this research was not able to find that he did expand his message. It appears that Senator Lee does change his message based on the social media posts studied. The original posts for his first campaign were short and to the point. He did have messages that were categorized but it was difficult to validate that the posts were codified correctly. He has been consistent on the themes provided but the message does change based on the public agenda in Utah. Giving people what they want to hear has been a part of Mike Lee's strategy.

At a broader level, the way Mike Lee sets his agenda based on knowing the audience, engaging with the audience's form of digital literacy, and giving that audience what they want to hear may seem like what other politicians do to stay in office. However, there is something else that populist do to take advantage of their position. Senator Lee demonstrates this in his social media posts by calling Democrat and Republican opponents part of the elite. Mike Lee makes himself seem to be an average person who is trying to fight against rich politicians.

In the examples given during the analysis, there are subtle hints demonstrating this. The quote about holding up bills is a subtle indication that Mike Lee knows how to do finances. The other one about his knowledge of the constitution is a way to put the family, which is important to people in Utah, into his post. The senator even attempts to use religious imagery known to the people of Utah (Romboy, 2020). The way that the senator puts in subtle hints is the main way that he runs as a populist. He is a man of the people and will most likely be elected repeatedly unless he fails to listen to the people, engage with them on their platform, or not give them what they want to hear.

Mike Lee is interesting to study as a politician who appears to support the public agenda and does not attempt to influence too much of what Utah voters think are important issues. His message does change, influenced by the public agenda. The agenda-setting theory does hold up by showing how important issues influence politicians, even populist politicians. This research shows that to be a populist politician isn't persuading people to see your point of view but to change your message to what the people want.

Conclusion

This study offers a detailed examination of how Senator Mike Lee employs populist rhetoric through social media, particularly Facebook, to align his messaging with the concerns of his Utah constituency. By analyzing over 2,000 posts across three election cycles, the research highlights Lee's strategic use of agenda-setting—specifically attribute agenda-setting—to elevate issues that resonate with voters and frame them in ways that emphasize his constitutional knowledge, critique of federal overreach, and personal connection to citizens. These patterns are emblematic of the populist playbook, where the politician positions themselves as an advocate for the “common man” and leverages social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers.

The findings reinforce the relevance of agenda-setting theory in today's digital communication landscape. Lee's ability to shift public attention toward key issues and frame them favorably demonstrates that social media functions as more than a campaign tool—it is a mechanism for shaping public discourse. The study confirms that the objects (issues) and attributes (framing) selected by politicians can significantly influence voter perception. Lee's consistent focus on federal land management, fiscal conservatism, and constitutional fidelity—coupled with testimonials and emotionally resonant messaging—reveals how targeted, localized communication can build long-term political support.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the growing body of literature that examines the intersection of populism and digital media. While previous studies have focused on high-profile national populists, this project demonstrates that local politicians like Mike Lee also deploy populist strategies effectively through sustained, strategic messaging. Lee's selective engagement with digital platforms familiar to his older, more conservative voter base—such as Facebook—further underscores the importance of digital literacy in shaping political communication. His success illustrates how populism is not necessarily about radical or inflammatory rhetoric but about aligning with public sentiment and presenting oneself as an accessible, values-driven leader.

Future research should expand beyond Facebook to include platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube, as well as examine how Lee and similar politicians respond to controversies or shifting political climates. Comparative studies of other state-level populist figures could help develop a broader understanding of how localized populism functions across different

demographics and regions. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that in the age of social media, political success increasingly depends on the ability to listen, engage, and adapt to the public's evolving agenda—a skill Senator Mike Lee has effectively harnessed throughout his career.

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