

A Case Study of the Mike Lee for Senate Campaign

Prepared by:



Wilson Perkins Allen Opinion Research
324 Second Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003
Phone: 405.286.6500
www.WPAResearch.com

The Mike Lee for Senate Campaign

At the outset of the 2010 election cycle, Senator Bob Bennett of Utah appeared to be in strong shape. In the past, he had coasted to re-election, winning 68% of the vote in 2004, and polling showed his image was still strong. Moreover, Bennett was an institution in the state, the latest in a line of powerful Utah leaders that included his father, a former four-term U.S. Senator. Coupled with Utah's convention nomination process, which had been dominated for years by party insiders, Bennett seemed certain to win re-election.

Despite these advantages, Bennett was not invulnerable. His moderate voting record was a weakness, and the political climate of 2010 ensured Bennett's votes for TARP and his health care proposal would be contentious issues. A crowded field emerged to challenge him at the convention, but Bennett had the endorsements of Senator Hatch and Mitt Romney – attention-grabbing names he could leverage for headlines.

Heading into the Convention, attorney Mike Lee, and businessman Tim Bridgewater separated themselves from the pack of challengers. The Tea Party had swept through Utah, and invigorated activists desperate for a change. Bennett was part of the problem, and these new activists backed Lee.

Bennett's strategy shifted from a holding pattern to a fight for survival once Mason Dixon and Rasmussen released polls of convention attendees showing Lee ahead by double-digits. Utah's nominee is selected by three rounds of voting at the convention, attended almost exclusively by the very same people Bennett had been courting at cocktail parties and meet-and-greets for almost 20 years. Each successive round narrows the field until there are only two candidates, at which point one can secure the nomination by winning 60% of the delegates' votes. If no candidate takes 60%, the top vote getters advance to a primary. If Bennett could survive the convention, casually conservative, less-engaged Republicans would tilt the primary in his favor.

His prospects improved when, just before the convention, the delegates received an inflammatory mailer with Lee's picture over the LDS Temple and Bennett's picture over the Capitol with the words, "Which candidate really has Utah values?" The mostly-LDS delegates were furious and blamed Lee for the sacrilegious political ploy. No one claimed responsibility for the smear piece, but Tim Bridgewater had the most to gain from cutting Lee so viciously in an attempt to force a primary.

Lee, once predicted to win, had been dealt irreparable damage at convention. Lee advanced to the final round of voting, and narrowly secured a spot in the primary as Bridgewater won nearly all of the votes cast for other candidates. Because of the mailer, Bridgewater had come dangerously close to the sixty percent of the votes he needed to avoid the primary altogether.

Since both candidates were conservatives without a legislative background, the campaign took a nasty turn early as each fought to define the other as a closet moderate. Bridgewater claimed Lee was plotting to turn Utah into a nuclear waste dump, and Lee exposed Bridgewater’s history of profiting from tax dollars. The state, and the party, split. Lee was endorsed by most of the Tea Party and 9/12 Project groups while Bridgewater had the party insiders- including a laundry list of Utah mayors. This degenerated into a “with us or against us” race, and Bridgewater had an ace up his sleeve: Bennett’s endorsement, carefully timed to maximize impact among moderate voters. Following the endorsement, Deseret News had Bridgewater up by nine points.

But Lee still had an opportunity. His polling showed that voters could be moved by a sharp contrast message about Bridgewater’s lobbying background. Bridgewater had lobbied for foreign corporations and his companies had benefited from earmarks, creating doubt about his ability to reform the system of which he was a part. Lee, on the other hand, was able to convincingly position himself as a constitutional conservative.

Lee was able to start television advertising first, and, by defining the terms in which voters evaluated the two candidates, he built a nine point lead before Bridgewater countered during the crucial early voting stage of the election.

But Bridgewater did counter, attacking Lee for his lack of business background and accused him of being a “D.C. lawyer” in efforts to persuade voters Lee was just another politician trying to advance his career.

Two weeks later, WPA’s first night of tracking showed Bridgewater had cut Lee’s lead to two points. The candidates traded a one point lead almost nightly that final week of the campaign, and, three days before the election, the race was tied.

When the final ballots were counted, Lee won by less than two and a half points.

