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Political Memes are the Grassroots Lobbying of the Future

If I asked you what a [head of lettuce with eyes](#), [a cartoon frog](#), and the [zodiac killer](#) all have in common, I'd be interested to know what exactly you'd come up with.

I'll let you off easy— the connecting thread is that all of the above are influential political memes. Yes, if you're stuck living in 2012 (which, frankly I envy you), memes aren't *just* the thing "all the kids are into these days."

Memes have already had an enormous impact on politics in the US and around the globe. From Senator Bernie Sanders' [iconic mitten-wearing inauguration appearance](#) to the aforementioned [head of lettuce](#) that outlasted former UK Prime Minister Liz Truss, political memes seem to be everywhere these days. But while it's easy to dismiss them as simply objects of satire, the way the [alt-right has weaponized them](#) through movements such as QAnon shows that they're not only to be laughed at.

Yet where the right seems to have clenched memes as their territory for radicalizing voters, there's still another option. Memes could be the grassroots lobbying of the future— a way for people to impact their politicians from the comfort of their smartphones.

In today's political landscape where the pithy quip constitutes newsworthiness, memes are uniquely suited to conveying political ideas. With a single image and caption one can get across a campaign's worth of ideological baggage.

There's been a lot said about the importance of [political "dogwhistles"](#), a term which is used to refer to "a covert appeal to some noxious set of views" as a Vox article puts it. But while political dogwhistles normally have negative connotations, signaling to the attuned an appeal to their darker instincts, they don't have to. Instead, in the reference of memes, the term of dogwhistles could be used more neutrally, referring to simply any sort of "in-joke" or "in-idea."

These "in-ideas" are the framework of any meme— you have to know the context to get the joke. The [media theory of framing](#) plays no small part in this. Framing is how we make sense of all the millions of images and ideas being slung at us from every direction all day, every day. Certain images carry with them ideological connotations, and by using these shortcuts we're able to understand how to depict these images in our minds.

Campaigns and their most ardent supporters have traditionally (traditional in the sense of the past few election cycles, at least) [been the ones to use memes](#) to frame themselves positively or their opponents negatively, using them as just another tool in the political communications toolbox.

But crucially, this process could work the other way around.

Instead of selling politicians and campaigns to voters, voters could use the power of memes to sell ideas and policy to politicians.

In many ways politicians are more accessible than ever through the internet and Twitter. Even if they aren't personally checking their social media mentions, you can bet their teams are. With [social listening](#), a person or brand can get a sense of what's being said about them online and how their reputation is fairing. For politicians, it can make a huge difference in getting ahead of a story or even getting reelected. But more importantly for those that would lobby their lawmakers, it means that they're listening in a different way than before.

You no longer have to have a Washington office and be a "professional" lobbyist to catch a politician's ear. As long as you have an internet connection and an idea to share, you can simply @ your lawmaker. You'll be competing with everyone else who has a gripe or praise, but that's where the memes come in.

Importantly, politicians, as much as we might hate to admit it, are people just like us. And they like memes too. Evidence lies in Ted Cruz's Twitter likes, or Donald Trump Jr.'s infamous Instagram page. Marjorie Taylor Greene likely wouldn't have [paraded a white balloon](#) around the Capitol building if it wasn't such a hit meme, and Bernie Sanders wouldn't have [raised millions for charity](#) if it wasn't for his inauguration meme.

The bottom line: politicians pay attention to memes. When you @ your lawmaker with a meme that frames your idea or cause in a way that is instantly understandable, there's likely a greater chance it will at least get them thinking about it. And when enough people start directing the same idea at a politician and pressuring action, that's where the magic happens. That's grassroots lobbying via memes.

Memes are the language of the now. If politicians can shape the political process with memes, we can shape their policy right back.