

PRINCIPLE

USE YOUR RADICAL FRINGE TO SHIFT THE OVERTON WINDOW

By strategically pushing the far edge of what is considered acceptable within a range of policy options, you can slide public opinion in your direction, making what was once fringe, seem like common sense.

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“THE CHALLENGE FOR ACTIVISTS AND ADVOCATES IS TO MOVE THE WINDOW IN THE DIRECTION OF THEIR PREFERRED OUTCOMES, SO THEIR DESIRED OUTCOME MOVES CLOSER AND CLOSER TO “COMMON SENSE.””

The various policy options available on a given issue can be roughly plotted on a spectrum of public acceptability, from unthinkable, to fringe, to acceptable, to common sense, to policy. The Overton window, named after Joseph Overton, a staffer for the center-right Mackinac Center for Public Policy, designates the range of points on the spectrum that are considered part of a “sensible” conversation within public opinion and/or traditional mass media.

The most important thing about the Overton window, however, is that it can be shifted to the left or the right, with the once merely “acceptable” becoming “popular” or even imminent policy, and formerly “unthinkable” positions becoming the open position of a partisan base. The challenge for activists and advocates is to move the window in the direction of their preferred outcomes, so their desired outcome moves closer and closer to “common sense.”

There are two ways to do this: the long, hard way, and the short, easy way. The long, hard way is to continue making your actual case persistently and persuasively until your position becomes more politically mainstream, whether it be due to the strength of your rhetoric or a long-term shift in societal values. By contrast, the short, easy way is to amplify and echo the voices of those who take a position a few notches more radical than what you really want.

For example, if what you actually want is a public health care option

POTENTIAL RISKS

Not all radical positions are effective in shifting the Overton window, so don't just reach for any old radical idea. Ideally, the position you promote should carry logical and moral force, and must include some common ground with your own position — it needs to be along the same continuum of belief if it is to be effective. It also must not be so far out of the mainstream that it becomes toxic for anyone vaguely associated with it, or the backlash will in fact push the Window in the opposite of the desired direction.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Battle in Seattle

in the United States, coordinate with and promote those pushing for single-payer, universal health care. If the single-payer approach constitutes the “acceptable left” flank of the discourse, then the public option looks, by comparison, like the conservative option it was once considered back when it was first proposed by Orrin Hatch in 1994.

This is Negotiating 101. Unfortunately, the right has been far ahead of the left in moving the Overton window in their desired direction for a long time. If anything, the left often plays it in the exact wrong way, actively policing and seeking to silence its radicals for fear that strong left positions will serve to discredit moderate left positions. The irony is that the Overton window should actually be easier for progressives to play: If you look at the polling on issue after issue, from education to jobs to foreign policy, the actual majority stances tend to be to the left of the range of policy proposals on offer.

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LEARN MORE

Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals
Saul Alinsky, 1971

<https://books.google.com/books?id=VIH0UbZ8qU4C&lpq=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Occupy Wall Street Can Shake Up A City — But Can it Create Lasting Change?

Greg Hanscom, Grist, 2011

<https://grist.org/politics/2011-11-18-occupy-wall-street-can-shake-up-a-city-but-can-it-create-lasting/>

Wall Street Demonstrators Challenge Centrist Consensus
Will Rubenstein, 2011

<https://oberlinreview.org/3855/opinions/wall-street-demonstrators-challenge-centrist-consensus/>

- Dow Chemical Apologizes for Bhopal
- Honk at Parliament
- Nuit Debout
- Round Dance Revolution
- Santa Claus Army
- The Salt March
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- Yomango

Tactics

- Debt strike
- Electoral guerrilla theatre

Principles

- Define “hardcore” strategically
- Develop an inside-outside strategy
- Escalate strategically
- Reframe the issue
- Turn the tables
- Use organizing strategies that scale
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Al faza’a (a surge of solidarity)
- Direct action
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Framing
- People’s “Shock Doctrine”
- Political identity paradox
- Prefigurative politics
- Revolutionary nonviolence
- Revolutionary reform
- Strategic nonviolence
- The propaganda model

Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Spectrum of allies
- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Campaign strategy,
Communications, Community building, Humour, Language,

Media, Movement building,
Pranks, Social media