

Pathways for

CHANGE :

6 Theories about How Policy Change Happens

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Most Americans learn something about the policy process in high school civics class: an idea becomes a bill, elected officials vote on it, and—if all goes well—the bill gets enacted into law. However, knowing the specific steps for ideas to become laws does not tell us much about how to promote policy change successfully or why certain policies move forward and others do not. That is where theories come into play. Theories can help unlock the inner workings of the policymaking process to explain how and why a change may or may not occur.

This brief lays out six theories grounded in diverse social science disciplines and worldviews that have relevance to advocacy and policy change efforts. The brief is not meant to be comprehensive; rather it introduces and illustrates

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theories, advocates have their own ideas about what will help them achieve or move toward a policy “win.” These internal ideas or assumptions about policymaking, also called theories of change, can be documented as visual diagrams that express the relationships between

theories and approaches that may be useful to advocates, funders, and evaluators.

In particular, these theories can inform the development of advocacy theories of change and logic models. Just as academics develop

advocacy actions and hoped-for results. When articulated, these strategy and belief system roadmaps can clarify expectations internally and externally, and facilitate more effective planning and evaluation. Knowing about and incorporating existing social science theories into our strategies can sharpen our thinking, provide new ways of looking at the policy world, and ultimately improve our theories of change.

How to Use This Brief

If you are an advocate:

- Being able to better explain and articulate the theory behind your work can help you to transfer knowledge to other colleagues, get funders or other constituents on board, and identify when and how to partner effectively with other groups or organizations.
- Knowing how to articulate the assumptions that guide your work can help you work more effectively with evaluators and funders to describe and appropriately measure your efforts.

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If you are a funder of advocacy and policy efforts:

- Knowing if your organization has a particular worldview or theory guiding its funding decisions can help you select grantees that are aligned with your organization.
- Being conversant in different theories that relate to advocacy efforts can support your efforts to aid grantees and make decisions about appropriate evaluation efforts.

If you are an evaluator:

- Having background knowledge about relevant theories and assumptions that underlie advocates' work can help you construct theories of change that reflect this thinking.
- Clarifying theories that guide strategy selection also can help you work with advocates to frame evaluation plans that will provide the most relevant and useful information.

Six Theories about Policy Change

Brief summaries follow of six social science theories about how policy change occurs (the matrix on page 3 provides an overview of all six). These include global theories developed by political scientists to explain how various kinds of advocacy strategies and conditions relate to policy change, and theories about common advocacy strategies or tactics that are likely part of broader advocacy efforts or campaigns.

Global Theories:

1

"Large Leaps"
or Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

2

"Coalition"
Theory or Advocacy Coalition Framework

3

"Policy Windows"
or Agenda Setting

Theories about Advocacy Strategies or Tactics:

4

"Messaging and Frameworks"
Theory

5

"Power Politics"
or Power Elites Theory

6

"Grassroots"
or Community Organizing Theory

The description for each theory includes a short summary; important underlying assumptions associated with the theory; the theory's application to advocacy; and an example theory of change that visually illustrates key concepts, strategies, and outcomes. ^{1,2}

¹ Theories of change are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

² The key to all successful advocacy work is advocacy organizations with strong capacity for advocacy work—i.e., the ability to choose strategies appropriate to the context and issue, identify opportunities for progress, develop relationships, make midcourse corrections, and communicate effectively. Though this key factor is highlighted specifically in only one theory of change, it is a critical component to the successful application of all six theories.

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SUMMARY OF 6 THEORIES

	Theory (Key Authors)	Discipline	How Change Happens	This theory may be useful when:
Global Theories	1. "Large Leaps" or Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner, Jones)	Political Science	Like seismic evolutionary shifts, significant changes in policy and institutions can occur when the right conditions are in place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large-scale policy change is the primary goal • Strong capacity for media advocacy exists
	2. "Coalition" Theory or Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith)	Political Science	Policy change happens through coordinated activity among a range of individuals with the same core policy beliefs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sympathetic administration is in office • A strong group of allies with a common goal is in place or can be formed
	3. "Policy Windows" or Agenda Setting (Kingdon)	Political Science	Policy can be changed during a window of opportunity when advocates successfully connect two or more components of the policy process: the way a problem is defined, the policy solution to the problem or the political climate surrounding their issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple policy streams can be addressed simultaneously (problem definition, policy solutions and/or political climate) • Internal capacity exists to create, identify, and act on policy windows
Theories related to Strategies or Tactics	4. "Messaging and Frameworks" or Prospect Theory (Tversky & Kahneman)	Psychology	Individuals' policy preferences or willingness to accept them will vary depending on how options are framed or presented.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The issue needs to be redefined as part of a larger campaign or effort • A key focus of the work is on increasing awareness, agreement on problem definition, or an issue's salience
	5. "Power Politics" or Power Elites Theory (C. Wright Mills, Domhoff)	Sociology	Policy change is made by working directly with those with power to make decisions or influence decision making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One or more key allies is in place • The focus is on incremental policy change (e.g., administrative or rule changes)
	6. "Grassroots" or Community Organizing Theory (Alinsky, Biklen)	Social Psychology	Policy change is made through collective action by members of the community who work on changing problems affecting their lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A distinct group of individuals is directly affected by an issue • The advocacy organization can and is willing to play a "convener" or "capacity-builder" role rather than the "driver" role

GLOBAL THEORIES

1

“Large Leaps” Theory (Punctuated Equilibrium Theory)

Believers of the “Large Leaps” theory recognize that —when conditions are right—change can happen in sudden large bursts that represent significant departures from the past, as opposed to small incremental changes that usually do not radically change the status quo. This

“While these conditions can set up the environment in which large-scale change can occur, they do not predict or guarantee it.”

theory also is referred to as “punctuated equilibrium theory,” stemming from evolutionary science terminology. Frank Baumgartner and Brian

Jones, major thinkers in this area, developed the model and have used it in longitudinal studies of agenda setting and decision making.

The theory holds that conditions for large-scale change happen when:

- An issue is defined differently or new dimensions of the issue get attention (typically a fundamental questioning of current approaches)
- New actors get involved
- The issue becomes more salient and receives heightened media and broader public attention.

While these conditions can set up the environment in which large-scale change can occur, they do not predict or guarantee it. For example, an issue can achieve increased attention and focus, but that heightened attention may not result in policy change. However, when all of the right conditions occur simultaneously, change generally is not incremental.

Underlying assumptions:

- Government institutions typically maintain the status quo and have a “monopoly” over the way issues are defined and decisions are made.
- Though institutions try to maintain their “monopoly,” the American political system of separation of powers and overlapping jurisdictions means there are many venues through which to pursue change.
- People pay attention to only a few issues at a time, and large scale change is unlikely without more attention focused on an issue.
- People typically become mobilized through redefinition of the prevailing policy issue or story, a narrative that should include both facts and emotional appeals.
- Media can play an integral role by directing attention to different aspects of the same issue and shifting attention from one issue to another. However, media attention does not cause policy change directly—it typically precedes or follows the change.
- Large-scale change typically involves creating or eliminating institutions (e.g., departments, agencies).

Application to advocacy:

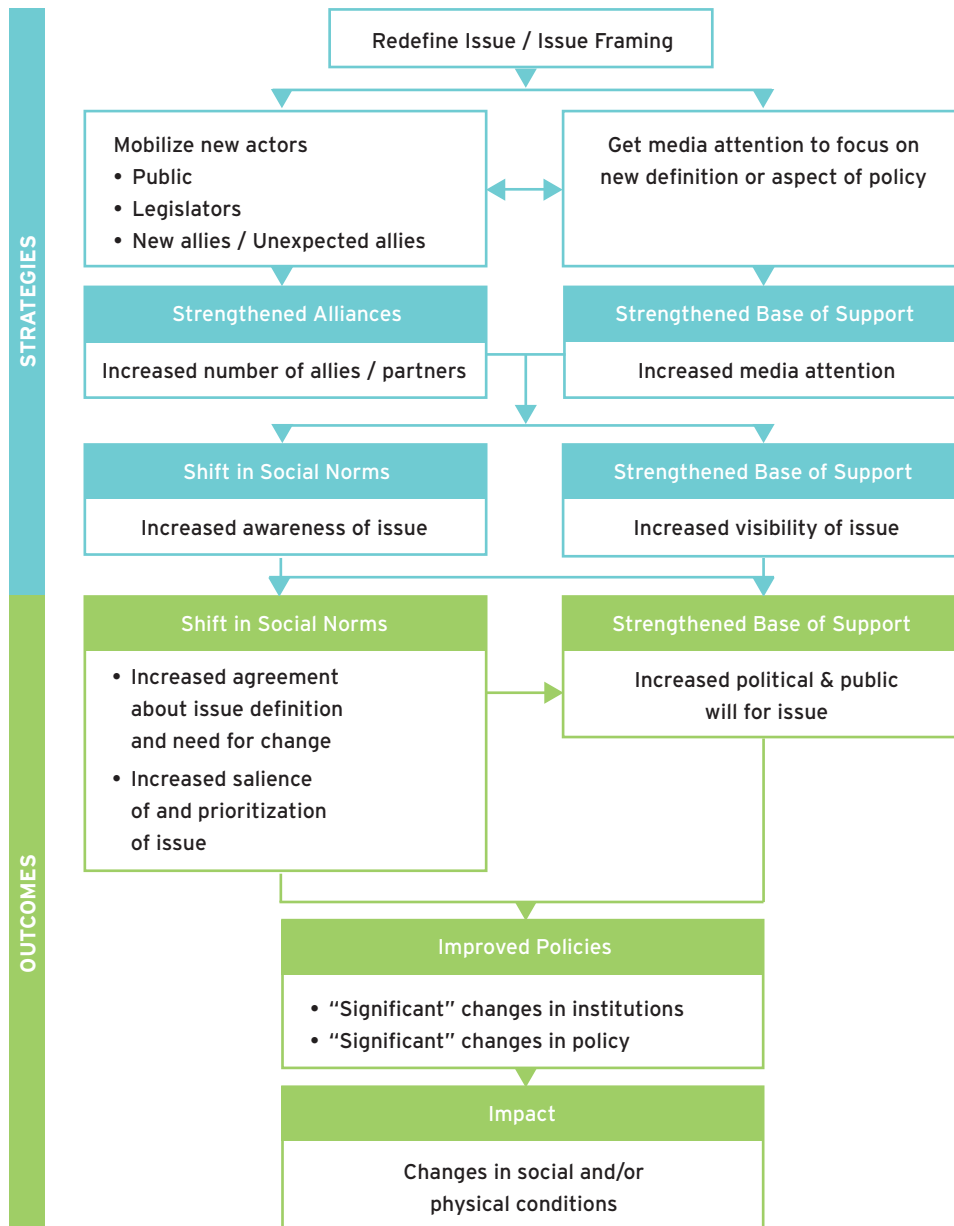
- Promising strategies include issue framing, mobilizing supporters, and media advocacy.
- Efforts should focus on questioning policies at fundamental levels as opposed to making administrative or rule changes to existing policies.
- Issue definition and agenda setting are key to mobilizing new people around an issue.

“Efforts should focus on questioning policies at fundamental levels as opposed to making administrative or rule changes to existing policies.”

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1

“Large Leaps” Theory of Change



2

“Coalition” Theory (Advocacy Coalition Framework)

Coalition theory, developed by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith and commonly known as the “Advocacy Coalition Framework,” proposes that individuals have core beliefs about policy areas, including a problem’s seriousness, its causes, society’s ability to solve the problem, and promising solutions for addressing it. Advocates who use this theory believe that policy change happens through coordinated activity among individuals with the same core policy beliefs.

Underlying assumptions:

- Coalitions are held together by agreement over core beliefs about policies. Secondary beliefs are less critical to alignment (e.g., administrative rules, budgetary allocations, statutory revisions).
- Because individuals and groups already share the same core policy beliefs, coalitions can contain have diverse members but effectively coordinate because of reduced “costs” (e.g., time, need to reach common understandings).
- Policy core beliefs are resistant to change.
- Policy core beliefs are unlikely to change unless:
 - Major external events such as changes in socioeconomic conditions or public opinion are skillfully exploited by proponents of change
 - New learning about a policy surfaces across coalitions that changes views about it.

“ Advocates who use this theory believe that policy change happens through coordinated activity among individuals with the same core policy beliefs. ”

“ Coalitions typically will explore and pursue multiple avenues for change (e.g., engaging in legal advocacy and changing public opinion), often simultaneously, to find a route that will bear fruit ”

- Policies are unlikely to change unless:
 - The group supporting the status quo is no longer in power
 - Change is imposed by a hierarchically superior jurisdiction.

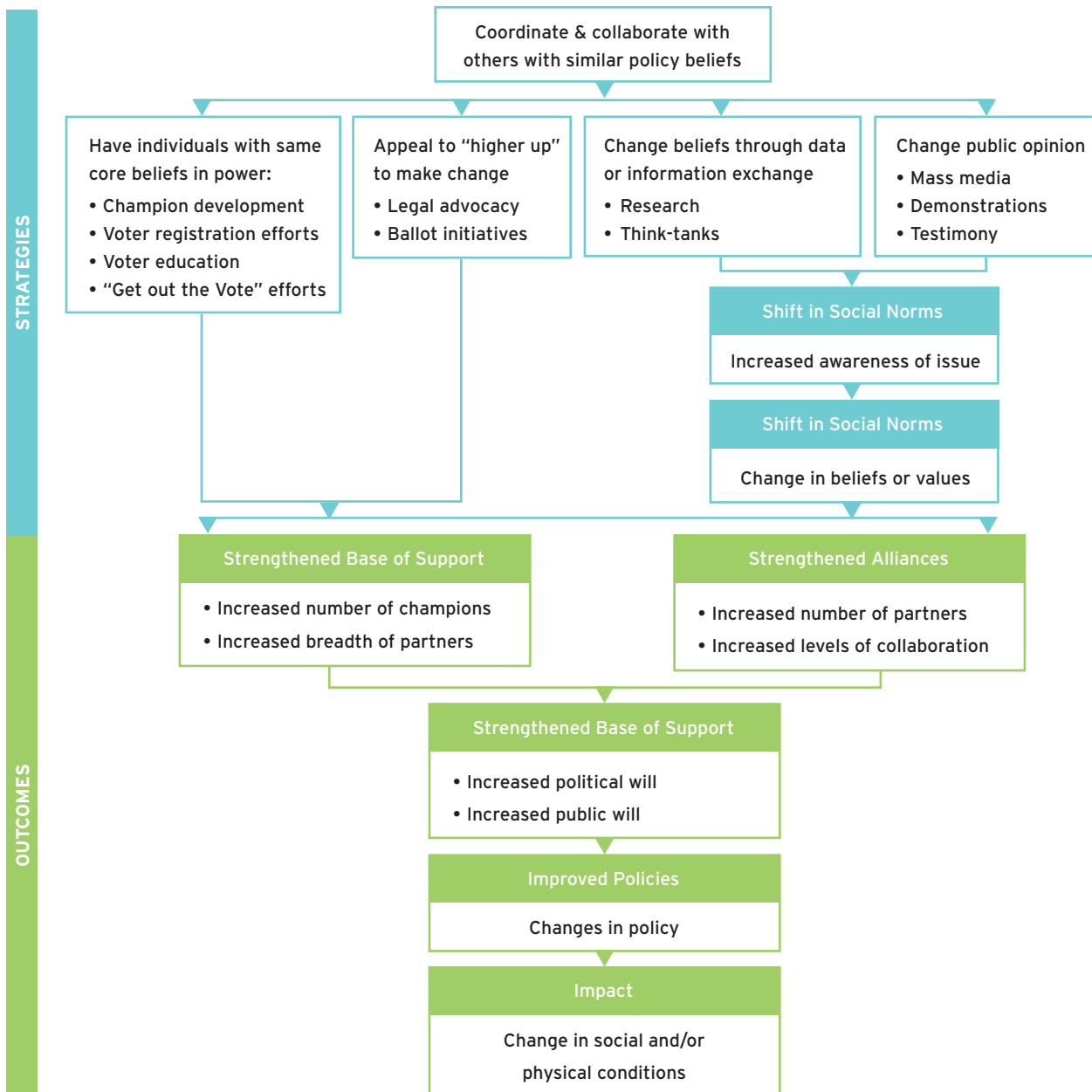
Application to advocacy:

- Promising strategies include:
 - Influencing like-minded decision makers to make policy changes
 - Changing incumbents in various positions of power
 - Affecting public opinion via mass media
 - Altering decision maker behavior through demonstrations or boycotts
 - Changing perceptions about policies through research and information exchange.
- Coalitions typically will explore and pursue multiple avenues for change (e.g., engaging in legal advocacy and changing public opinion), often simultaneously, to find a route that will bear fruit
- Coalitions should identify and reach out to diverse groups with similar core policy beliefs (e.g., unlikely allies).

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2

"Coalition" Theory of Change



3

“Policy Windows” Theory (Agenda Setting Theory)

John Kingdon’s classic theory of agenda setting attempts to clarify why some issues get attention in the policy process and others do not. He identified three “streams” in the policy process:

- Problems: the way social conditions become defined as problems to policymakers, including the problem’s attributes, its status, the degree of consciousness, and whether the problem is perceived as solvable with clear alternatives
- Policies: the ideas generated to address problems
- Politics: political factors, including the “national mood” (e.g., appetite for “big government”), interest group and advocacy campaigns, and changes in elected officials.

“The way problems are defined makes a difference in whether and where they are placed on the agenda.” To increase the likelihood that an issue will receive serious attention or be placed on the “policy agenda,” at least two streams need to converge at critical moments or “policy windows.” Policy windows are “windows of opportunity” when there is the possibility for policy change.

Underlying assumptions:

- Policy streams operate independently.
- Advocates can couple policy streams when a policy window opens. For example, advocates can attach their solutions to a problem that has risen on the agenda (even if its rise was independent of their efforts).
- Success is most likely when all three components

(problem, policies and politics) come together during a policy window.

- Policy windows can be predictable (e.g., elections, budget cycles) and unpredictable (e.g., a dramatic event or crisis, such as a plane crash or hurricane). They also can be created.
- The way problems are defined makes a difference in whether and where they are placed on the agenda. Problem definition also has a value/emotional component; values and beliefs guide decisions about which conditions are perceived as problems.
- Often there are many competing ideas on how to address problems. To receive serious consideration, policy options need to be seen as technically feasible and consistent with policymaker and public values.
- To effectively recognize and take advantage of open policy windows, advocates must possess knowledge, time, relationships, and good reputations.

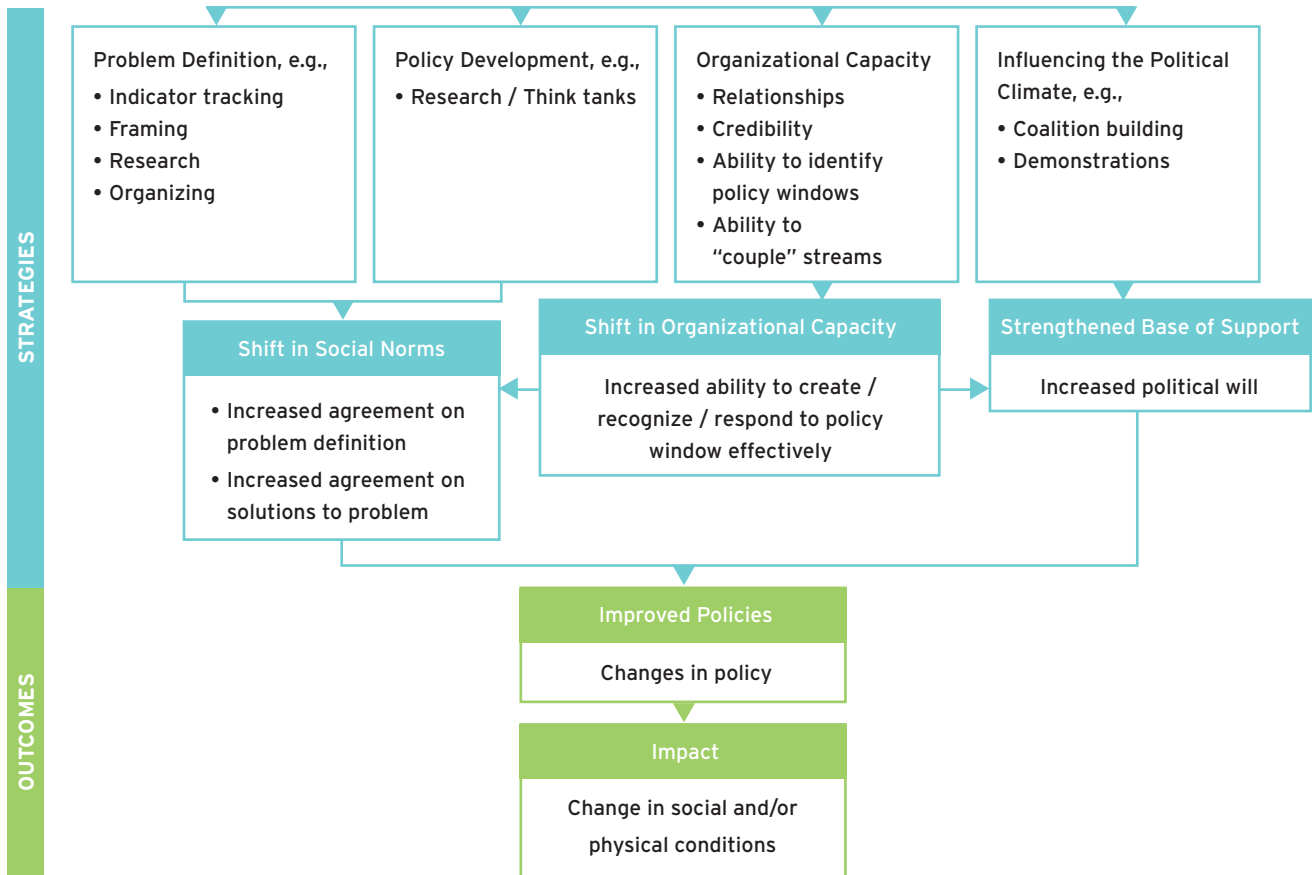
Application to advocacy:

- Promising strategies include:
 - Impacting problem definition: framing the issue; monitoring indicators that assess the existence and magnitude of issues, initiating special studies of an issue, promoting constituent feedback.
 - Developing policy options: research, publications.
 - Influencing the political climate: coalition building, demonstrations, media advocacy.
- Advocates and organizations need adequate capacity to create or recognize policy windows and then respond appropriately.

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3

"Policy Window" Theory of Change



4

“Messaging and Frameworks” Theory (Prospect Theory)

With this theory, also known as “Prospect Theory,” Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman challenged a conventional school of thought that suggests people make rational decisions by weighing different options’ costs and benefits and then choosing the one that will benefit them the most. Their research proved that individuals develop different preferences based on the ways in which options are presented or framed.

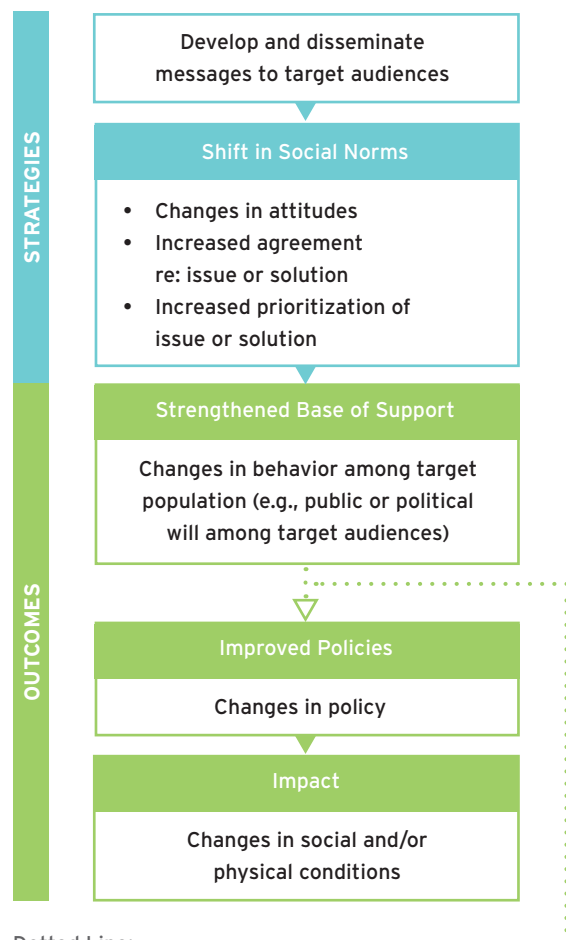
“ Decision making can be inconsistent. People may make choices that are less beneficial to themselves or riskier than might be expected based on how information is presented. ”

Underlying assumptions:

- Issues and choices can be framed in multiple ways.
- The frame individuals use to make decisions is controlled partly by the way a problem is presented and partly by a decision maker’s norms, habits, and personal characteristics.
- People prefer options that seem certain rather than ambiguous, even if the end results are less beneficial to them personally.
- People tend to simplify decision making and evaluate options in terms of their direct consequences rather than connect their decisions to previous choices or acts.
- Decision making can be inconsistent. People may make choices that are less beneficial to themselves or riskier than might be expected based on how information is presented.
- Even though the results may be the same, people may make different choices given different contexts or scenarios.

Application to advocacy:

- Promising strategies include issue framing (or re-framing), message development, communications, or media advocacy.
- This theory is likely embedded as one strategy in a broader campaign rather than as a stand-alone activity.



Dotted Line:

The strength of the link between “changes in behavior” and “changes in policy” depends on the target audience and message used. In most cases, this outcome chain would be part of a campaign with multiple strategies rather than a stand alone activity intended to achieve policy change.

5

“Power Politics” Theory (Power Elites Theory)

The “Power Politics” theory, also known as “Political Elites” or “Power Elites” theory, proposes that the power to influence policy is concentrated in the hands of a few. This theory has a long history, including C. Wright Mills’ seminal 1956 book, *The Power Elites*, which describes the power and class structures in America (e.g., political, military, and economic elites) and how they interact with and impact public policy.

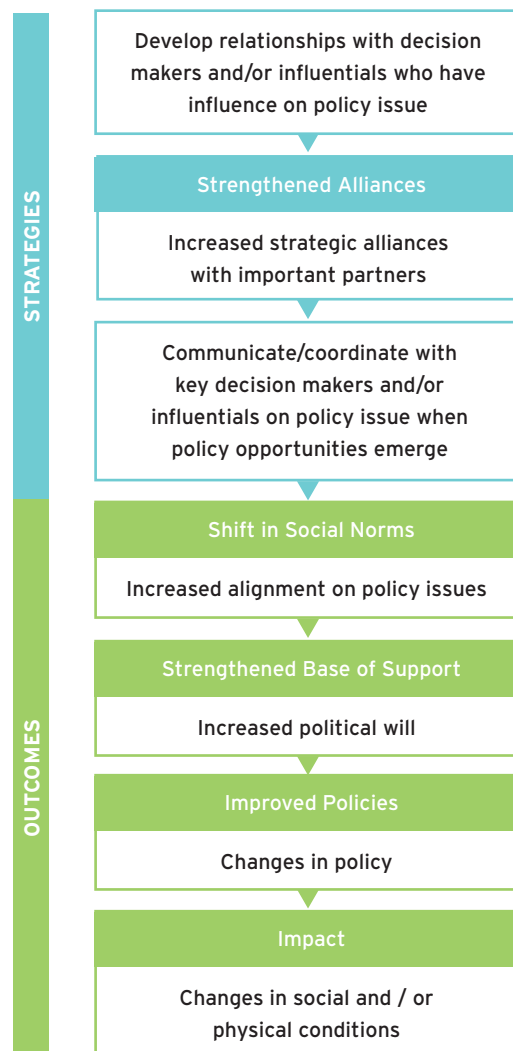
Underlying assumptions:

- Some people have more power than others.
- Political systems are stratified. This is described variously by different theorists, with individuals serving as one of the following:
 - Decision makers or those directly involved in policy decisions
 - Influentials or individuals to whom decision makers look for advice, and whose interests and opinions they take into account or from whom they fear sanctions
 - The rest of the population, including activists, the attentive public, voters, and non-participants.
- Power can be used in different ways:
 - Direct influence: when individuals participate in the actual decision making
 - Indirect influence: when individuals influence others who decide policy
 - Implicit power: when individuals are influenced by the anticipated reaction of other individuals or groups.
- Elites or influentials can be “establishment” figures (e.g., legislators, party officials) or other politically-significant strategic elites, such as senior civil servants, managers of important economic enterprises, leaders mass organizations, leading professionals, prominent intellectuals, journalists, or religious leaders.

- Influence in one policy area does not necessarily mean influence in another.

Application to advocacy:

- Promising strategies include relationship development and communication with those who have influence.
- Advocacy efforts are focused on the few, not the many.
- It is critical to identify who has influence related to the specific policy issue or area being addressed and to develop relationships with them.
- The organization must be seen as a credible partner or voice to impact decision makers or influentials.



6

“Grassroots” Theory (Community Organizing Theory)

Unlike the “Power Politics” theory, “Grassroots” or community organizing proponents view power as changeable and dynamic, not something held exclusively by elites. They believe groups can create power by taking mutual action to achieve social change. Saul Alinsky laid the foundation for this theory about community organizing in his 1971 book, *Rules for Radicals*.

Underlying assumptions:

- Power exists when people cooperate or obey rather than as a monolithic, absolute entity.
- Power bases can be shifted through actions and events.
- Organizing efforts should reflect the wishes of people directly affected by the problem.
- Organizing requires building the capacity of those affected by the problem to address it.
- Efforts should focus on changing institutions and policies, not individuals.

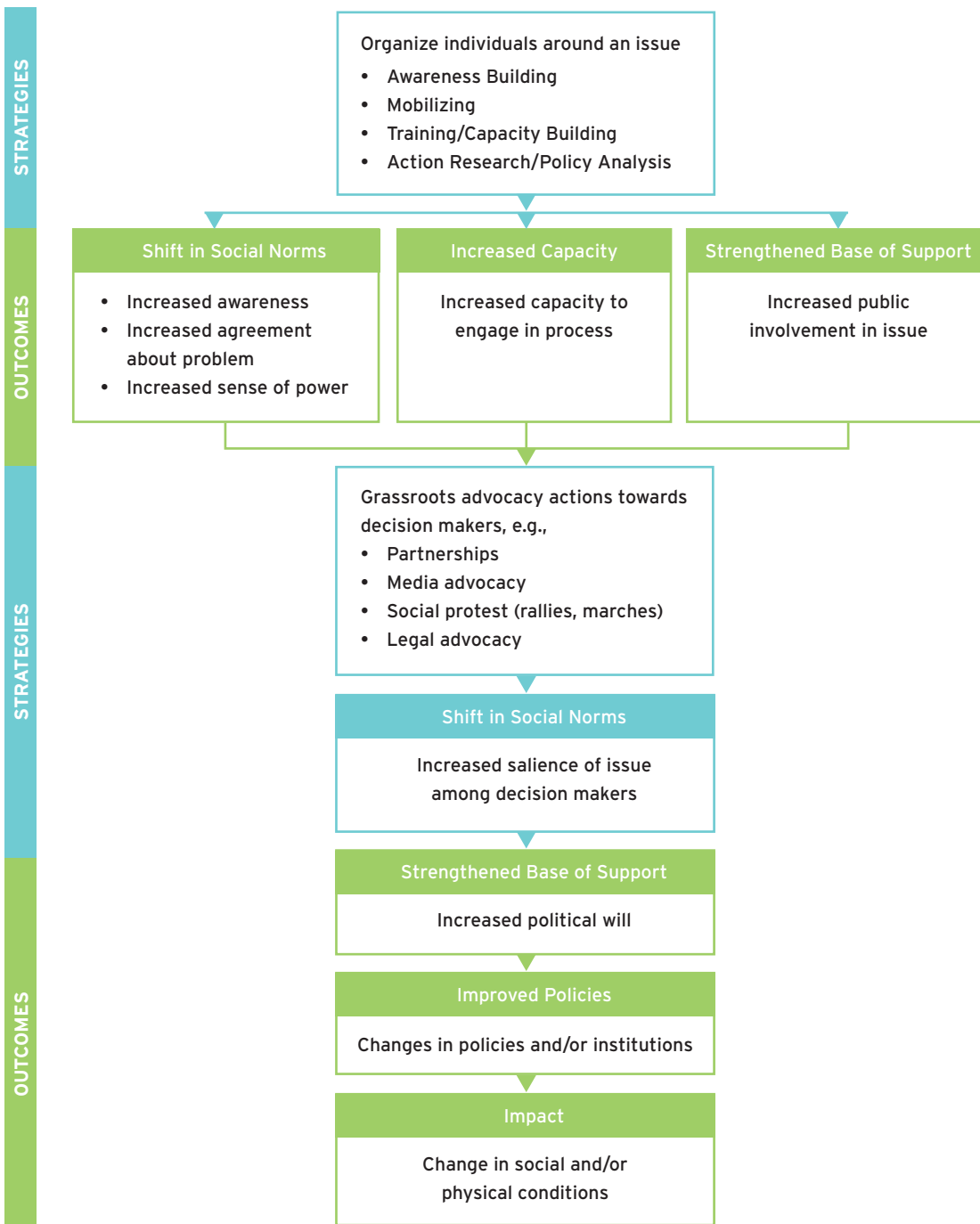
Application to advocacy:

- Promising strategies include training, capacity building, community mobilizing, awareness building, action research, policy analysis, media advocacy, social protest, whistleblowing.
- Advocacy efforts are focused on working with the many, not the few.
- The advocacy organization is not the leader; rather it helps facilitate the efforts of a collective to achieve social change.

“ They believe groups can create power by taking mutual action to achieve social change. ”

6

"Grassroots" Theory of Change



CONCLUSION

These six theories provide a range of ideas about how policy change occurs. Some may closely align with your world views, while others may not resonate. Regardless, understanding different theories about policy change can help organizations more effectively choose advocacy strategies, focus evaluation efforts on the right outcomes, and avoid the “kitchen sink” syndrome of doing a little bit of everything and unrealistically expecting change in all areas.

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