

Center for Evaluation Innovation

# The Advocacy Strategy Framework

A tool for articulating an advocacy theory of change

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## INTRODUCTION

For social change makers, thinking through and articulating the process for how change will occur—or identifying a theory of change—undoubtedly is a useful exercise for formulating effective strategy. Theories of change are illustrations of how change is expected to play out over time and the role that organizations will play in producing that change. They show how strategies will connect to interim outcomes that then set the stage for long-range goals.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of developing a theory of change is now a well-accepted practice among funders and their grantees. Less patience exists, however, with the tools available for articulating theories of change. Common complaints are that they can be too linear, too removed from context, and too restricted in their ability to facilitate thinking about how strategies need to adapt over time. This is especially true for advocacy, where theories and their associated strategies may need to shift in response to a variable political context, or if advocacy tactics are not as effective as anticipated.

**This brief offers a simple one-page tool for thinking about the theories of change that underlie public policy advocacy strategies.** It first presents the tool and then offers six questions that advocates, and funders working with advocates, can work through to better articulate their theories of change.

The tool—labeled the advocacy strategy framework—has several advantages over more familiar linear box-and-arrow theory-of-change tools:

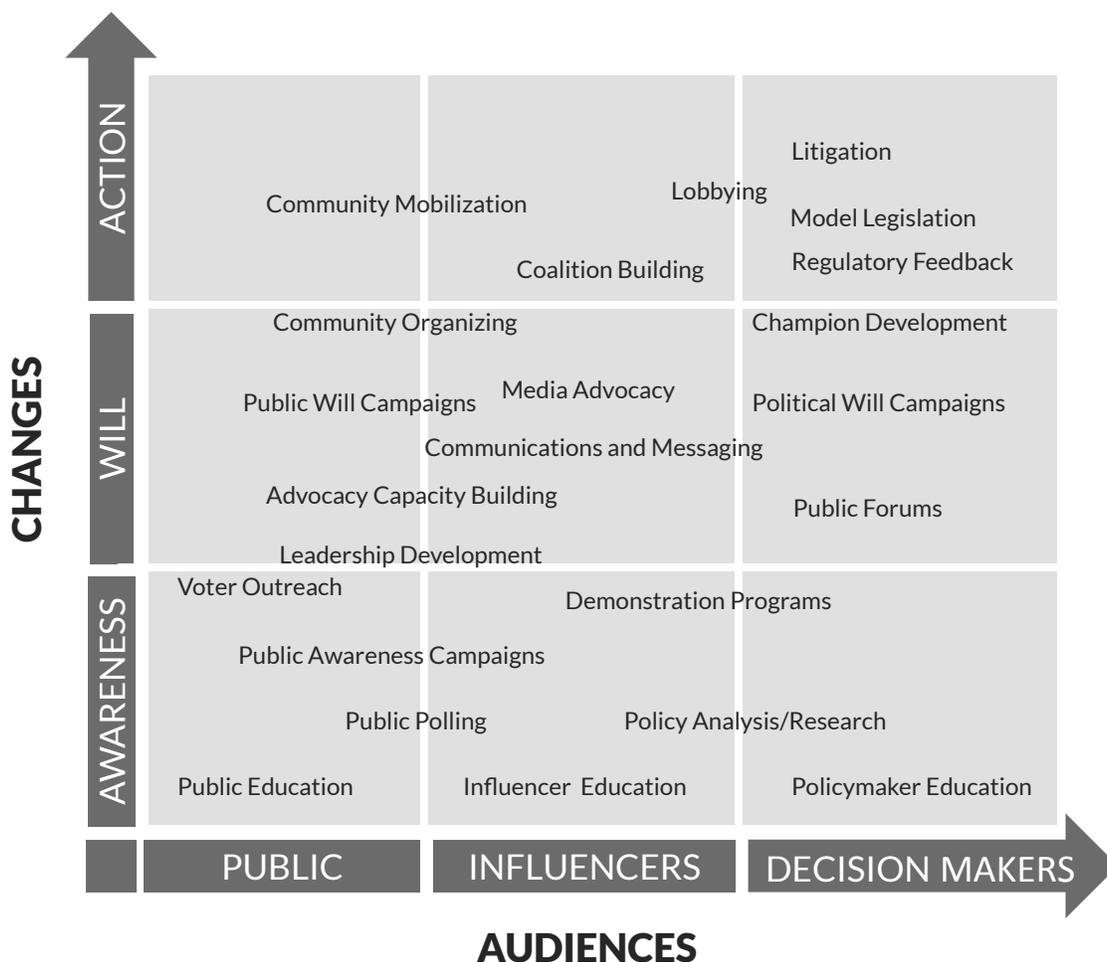
- As advocacy is not predictable or linear, the tool does not force linear thinking.
- It offers a place to start, rather than a blank page.
- It helps advocates to think more specifically about audiences—who is expected to change and how, and what it will take to get them there.
- While theories of change often consider advocacy strategies in isolation of other efforts, this tool helps to think about how other advocates (like-minded or in opposition) are positioned.
- It prompts thinking about useful tactics and meaningful interim outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, E. (2005). An introduction to theory of change. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 11(2), p.12, 19. Available at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue30/expert3.html>.

## THE ADVOCACY STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

The framework below can be used to illustrate any advocacy strategy.<sup>2</sup> It is organized around two main dimensions of an advocacy strategy—the *audiences* targeted (x-axis) and the *changes* desired (y-axis) with those audiences.



**Audiences** are the individuals and groups that advocacy strategies target and attempt to influence or persuade. They represent the main actors in the policy process and include the *public* (or specific segments of it), policy *influencers* (e.g., media, community leaders, the business community, thought leaders, political advisors, other advocacy organizations, etc.), and *decision makers* (e.g., elected officials, administrators, judges, etc.). Strategies may focus on just one audience or target more than one simultaneously.

<sup>2</sup> The framework first appeared in Coffman, J. (2008). *Foundations and Public Policy Grantmaking*. Paper prepared for The James Irvine Foundation.

**Changes** are the results an advocacy effort aims for with audiences to progress toward a policy goal. The three points on this continuum differ in terms of how far an audience is expected to engage on a policy issue. The continuum starts with basic *awareness* or knowledge. Here the goal is to make the audience aware that a problem or potential policy solution exists. The next point is *will*. The goal here is to raise an audience's willingness to take action on an issue. It goes beyond awareness and tries to convince the audience that the issue is important enough to warrant action and that any actions taken will in fact make a difference. The third point is *action*. Here, policy efforts actually support or facilitate audience action on an issue. Again, advocacy strategies may pursue one change with an audience or more than one simultaneously.

### UNDERSTANDING “WILL”

Advocacy theories of change often are vague about the mysterious middle ground between awareness and action. Yet we know from research that increased awareness about a problem or a potential solution is rarely sufficient to trigger action. Public or political “will” describes the stage between the two, where issue awareness is transformed into a sense of urgency and relevance that is the precursor to an audience taking action once the opportunity arises. It is useful to explore five components of “will” when building advocacy theories of change:

- **Opinion** is a person's belief or judgement about an issue. People need to take a position on an issue for will to be built. There is a whole range of issues about which people may have knowledge but have no opinion at all.
- **Intensity** refers to the strength of a person's opinion. People need to hold their opinions strongly—either for or against an issue or a solution—before it rises to a level worthy of their time and attention.
- **Salience** is how important and relevant an issue is to people. People may hold a strong opinion about an issue, yet still not find that the issue is relevant enough to their lives to make political choices based on the issue.
- **Capacity** to act is the know-how, skills, and confidence to take the desired action when called upon. For example, citizens must know how to mobilize or engage with policymakers to push a particular solution before they can be expected to do so.
- **Willingness** to act expresses the idea of a person's willingness to take a particular action despite the risks or tradeoffs that are associated with that action, which might range from angering peers or constituents who disagree to arrest or violence as a result of participating in public demonstrations.

For more information about “will,” see *Willing and Able: A Broader Definition of Public Will* by Julia Coffman, available at [www.evaluationinnovation.org](http://www.evaluationinnovation.org).

**Within the framework are specific types of advocacy tactics that can be used to achieve policy goals.**<sup>3</sup> The tactics are organized according to where they fall on each strategic dimension: which type of audience the tactic is likely to reach, and how far that tactic might realistically move the audience along the spectrum of awareness to will to action. For example, in the left lower corner of the framework where the focus is on the raising public awareness, tactics include public awareness campaigns, voter outreach, and public polling (Appendix A offers definitions of each advocacy tactic).

## USING THE FRAMEWORK: SIX QUESTIONS

This section offers guidance on how to use of the tool to articulate the theory of change behind an advocacy strategy. It asks advocates and funders to respond to six questions about advocacy strategies, using the framework to support theory-related thinking.

### 1) How is the strategy positioned?

The first step in using the tool is to identify and illustrate how a strategy is positioned within the framework. It is best to start by thinking broadly about how the strategy sits along the framework's two strategic dimensions.

***Which audiences need to be targeted—the public, policy influencers, and/or decision makers—to advance the policy goal?*** Some policy issues can be advanced through targeted work with policymakers and key influencers, with little involvement of the public. Other issues are advanced primarily through the public, particularly those that require a popular vote, such as a ballot initiative. But advocacy more often requires working strategically with the many groups and individuals who play roles in and influence the policy process.

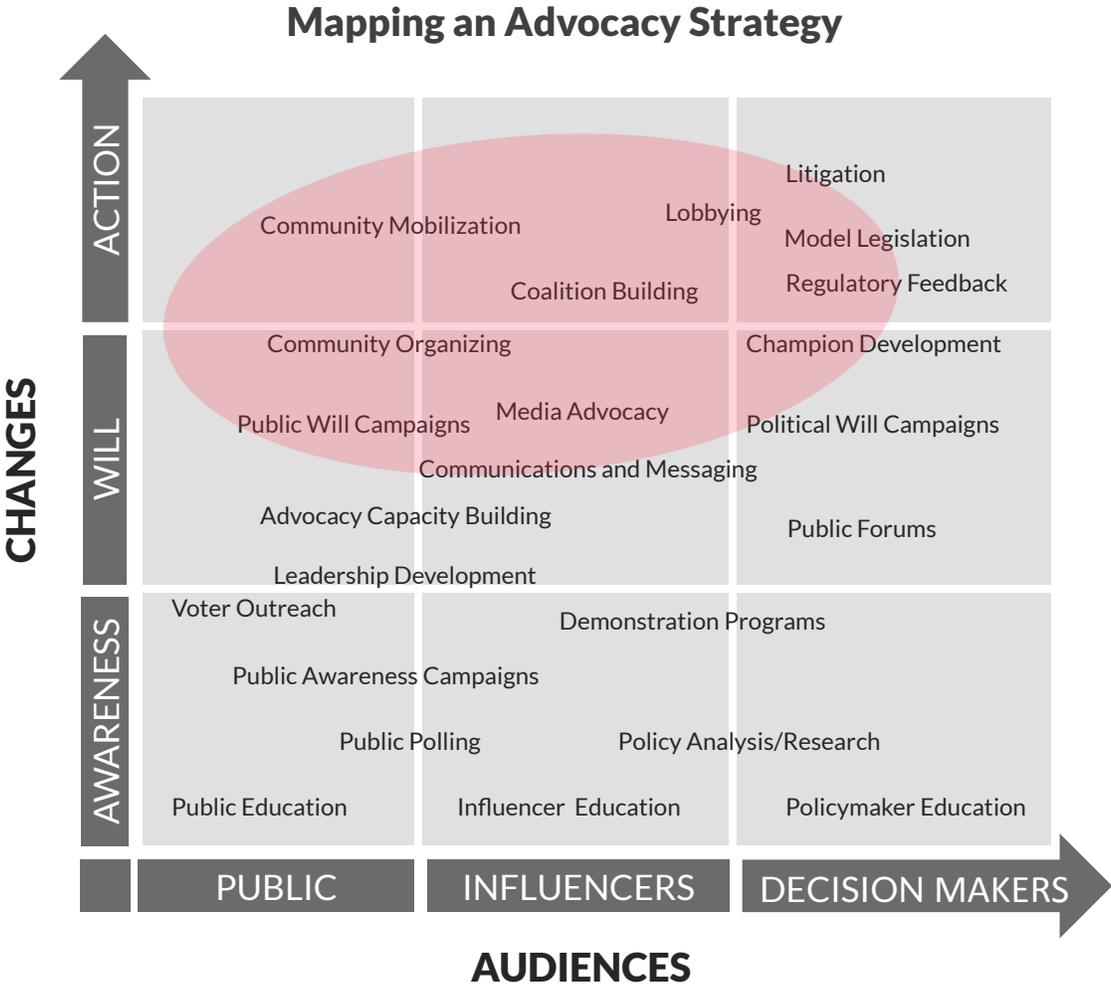
***What do advocates want to accomplish with each audience in order to achieve the policy goal?*** Some issues are brand new, the problems to be addressed have not been clearly documented, and audiences are unaware of the problem's importance. Other issues are known, but they lack a sense of urgency and importance in the policy arena. Still others may be "stuck." For example, the evidence base documenting existing problems may be insufficient or unconvincing, issues may be perceived as so deep-rooted that proposed solutions seem unfeasible, or an organized constituency to advocate for a policy's adoption may be lacking. Because policy issues are at different points, determining where

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<sup>3</sup> The framework can apply to a broad spectrum of policy goals, including those at the local, state, or federal level, and those in the legislative, executive, administrative, or judicial domains.

audiences stand now, along with how far they need to move in order to achieve a policy goal, is essential.

The shading in the figure illustrates how identifying a strategy’s positioning might work. The hypothetical policy goal in this example calls for an action-oriented strategy that mobilizes both the public and policy influencers to advocate with decision makers and inspire them to act. The strategy calls for tactics that include community organizing and mobilization, coalition building and coordinated action, and champion development with decision makers to generate the action needed to move the policy issue forward. In other cases, different audiences may be at very different places along the change continuum.



**TIP:** Do not start by identifying which tactics the strategy is using or should use. Instead, start with where the strategy stands on the two main dimensions, and then use the tactics as a check on the appropriateness of that positioning. Remember that these tactics are merely illustrative examples. It is not expected that a strategy will be using all of the

tactics that fall within a strategy's shading. In addition, some tactics may fall outside of that shading.

**TIP:** Look at what is *not shaded* and think about why not. For example, awareness about an issue or problem may already be high and therefore not a focus; the challenge instead will be increasing the audience's perception of its salience and the willingness to act on behalf of that issue.

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## 2) Who specifically is the strategy trying to influence and how?

Unlike a typical theory-of-change tool, the framework encourages specific consideration of who is being targeted by the strategy and how. While the framework identifies the three broad categories of audiences advocates might engage, it is important to specify who within those categories is being targeted. Which segments of the public? Which policy influencer groups or individuals? Which decision makers?

Being able to communicate effectively is at the heart of effective advocacy, and effective communications requires tailoring messages to audiences. The argument that excites labor union members, for example, may not work with the business community.

### EXAMPLE AUDIENCES

PUBLIC	INFLUENCERS	DECISION MAKERS
Parents of school-age children	Trade associations	Members of Congress
Seniors 65 and older	Business community	State legislators
Millennials	Labor/Unions	City council members
Married couples	Political elites	Agency administrators
Democrats or Republicans	Wealthy donors	School board members
Immigrants	Teachers	Superintendents

**TIP:** In order for change to occur, somebody needs to do something differently than what they are doing right now. Make sure that the strategy aims to move somebody toward action. Decades of research have shown that just making people more aware of an issue or problem generally is not enough to mobilize them to act.

**TIP:** Pay attention to the role that the public is expected to play in the strategy. Even if a determination is made that public demand and mobilization are not required for a policy goal to be achieved, what will be required to ensure successful implementation and sustained support over the long term?

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### 3) What are the underlying assumptions about how change happens?

Theories of change should do more than identify positioning and tactics. They should identify the underlying assumptions and beliefs about how the advocacy process will unfold to achieve policy goals. Doing this requires basing the theory of change on notions about how politics and the policy process work, what it takes to effect change in that process on a given issue, and the specific levers that advocates need to push to catalyze change.

Underlying assumptions may be based on:

**Social science theories:** Many research-based theories about the policy process and about the actors that play roles in it can form the conceptual underpinning of an advocacy theory of change. Those theories can come from such diverse disciplines as political science, sociology, psychology, social psychology, or communications, and may be about how the policy process works, the actors that participate in it, or different advocacy strategies. They may draw on, for example, theories about networks, coalitions, civil society, or community organizing and mobilization.

For a description of social science theories about the policy process, see ***Pathways for Change: 10 Theories to Inform Advocacy and Policy Change*** by Sarah Stachowiak at [www.evaluationinnovation.org](http://www.evaluationinnovation.org).

**Values:** Theories of change also may be grounded in advocates' or funders' own values and notions about what works. Some advocates or funders value policy change regardless of how it happens; others care about the achievement of certain steps and outcomes along the way. For example, some funders want to see the involvement of voices affected by the policies being debated. Others emphasize collaboration among advocacy groups. Still others value advocates' use of evaluation and data to inform their ongoing work.

**Experience:** While there is no guarantee that what worked before will work again with advocacy, assumptions about how change will occur may also come from previous experience, with successful or unsuccessful advocacy efforts.

**TIP:** Look for competing or misaligned assumptions about how change occurs. Organizations involved in a collaborative advocacy effort might have different ideas about how best to achieve policy change. Some might feel that a professional advocate-led

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approach that uses largely insider advocacy tactics is most efficient and effective. Others might feel that a grassroots approach would make room for those affected by the policies on which the advocacy was focused to participate and help shape the advocacy agenda, and ultimately lead to change that is more sustainable. Even when organizations collaborate, they may be unaware that competing theories of change are in play, and that those differing notions are causing conflicts among the groups involved.

**TIP:** Exploring assumptions about politics and the policy process might surface new insights about which audiences need to be targeted, or which tactics will work under what circumstances. It can be useful to revisit the first two questions after this step to determine whether the strategy should be positioned differently or if specific audiences need more attention.

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#### **4) Who else is working on this and how?**

Advocacy often features multiple voices working on the same issue—aligned or in opposition. The framework has the advantage of allowing for the mapping of multiple advocacy strategies onto the same framework. This kind of mapping can be used to identify where other organizations or collaborators are positioned and how they are or are not complementary. Identifying collaborators' positioning puts the strategy in context, shows where and how it will add value, and flags potential points of conflict. It also illustrates potential points of synergy that might not already exist.

This mapping allows for questions such as:

- How are advocates complementing one another?
- Is there unnecessary duplication of effort?
- Are strategies unintentionally working in opposition?
- What does the opposition's positioning indicate about how advocates should respond?

The exercise of overlaying how others are positioned in the framework also facilitates a clearer articulation of how a particular advocacy organization is contributing to a policy goal.

**TIP:** If relevant, do not forget to identify how the opposition, or a competing interest, is positioned. Consider whether counteractions are necessary, particularly where there is activity or outcome overlap. For example, if the opposition has a media strategy, consider

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potential audience reactions to competing messages and how to frame messages accordingly.

**TIP:** The framework can be a useful tool for looking at how an entire field is positioned on an advocacy issue—where there are gaps in capacity or implementation, and what actions may be necessary to make sure those gaps are filled.

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## 5) How will the strategy look in several years?

It can take a long time to achieve a policy goal. Or, a sudden window of opportunity might open that no one could have anticipated, speeding the process along. Successful advocates typically change their strategies over time to meet changing circumstances, such as a shift in elected officials, a shift in public opinion, a crisis, unexpected opposition, or the introduction of related legislation. In addition, strategies may need to occur in phases. For example, first it may be important to make the case using research to document a problem, or to use demonstration programs to document a solution and its effectiveness. The next phase might then involve effective communication of that case to audiences in a position to do something about it. Sequencing the focus of effort and resources over time may be critical.

Think ahead to three to five years from now. Consider:

- How might possible shifts in the context—political, economic, or social—affect how the strategy is positioned?
  - Assuming the strategy does not go precisely according to plans, and one or more of the audiences does not respond, how will the strategy adjust in response?
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**TIP:** Scenario planning or contingency planning might be a useful exercise at this point. Identify a small number of possible scenarios over the next several years and identify the implications for the strategy if those scenarios play out. For example, how might the strategy need to change in the face of changing control of the legislature or executive branch? How might a significant change in budget affect the issue's position on the policy agenda?

**TIP:** An “advocacy premortem” also may be useful here. A premortem is a *hypothetical* postmortem or after-action review that takes place at the beginning of an advocacy effort but imagines that the effort has already occurred—and has failed. Advocates, funders, and other stakeholders are then tasked with identifying possible reasons for the effort’s failure. Each person independently writes down every possible reason that the effort might have failed, even issues they might not normally mention or that they fear are impolitic. Each member then shares one reason from his or her list until all reasons have been recorded and a collective list is generated.<sup>4</sup> Participants then explore which of these events are most likely, how the team can watch for signals that things are going awry, and how the strategy might better anticipate these challenges.

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## **6) What interim outcomes are relevant to know if the strategy is on track?**

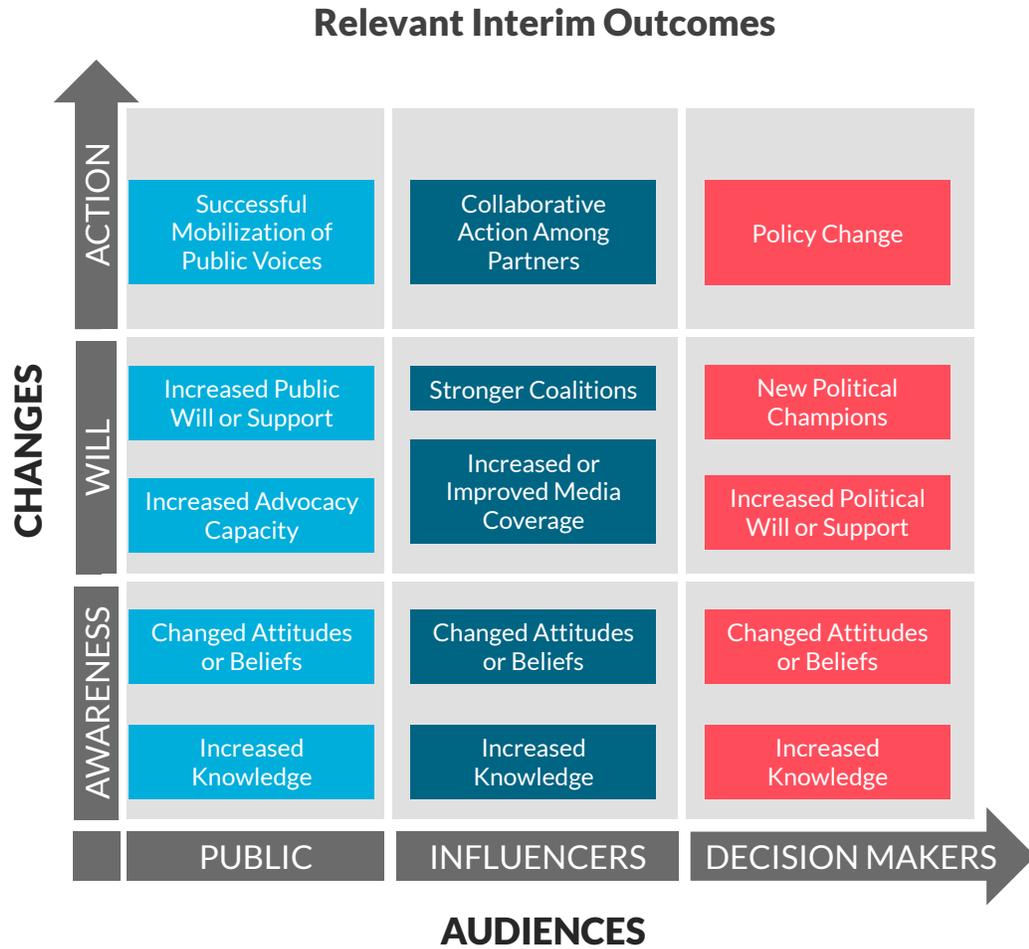
Given the unpredictability of the political environment and the myriad factors that might affect policy change, it is important to assess an advocacy effort for more than just its ability to achieve a particular policy goal. In addition to ultimately contributing to a particular policy outcome, many advocacy efforts have a larger set of interim outcomes in mind as advocates try to build and sustain their influence in the policy process. For example, in addition to interacting directly with policymakers, advocates might build coalitions with other organizations or develop high-profile political spokespersons that increase their ability to move multiple policy issues. Or they might aim to develop a network of community-based advocates who become active grassroots voices.

Sometimes policy goals take years to achieve; interim outcomes signal important progress to be achieved along the way. Capturing interim outcomes helps advocates check whether strategies are on track or where adjustments might be needed. It also ensures that evaluations do not unfairly conclude that entire advocacy efforts failed if policy goals are not achieved within an expected timeframe.

The figure below identifies a set of possible interim outcomes for an advocacy strategy, depending on how that strategy is positioned in the framework. This is not an exhaustive list, but it points to common interim outcomes for advocates. All of them are about desired changes in target audiences, rather than about advocate outputs that are more commonly offered as evidence of progress.

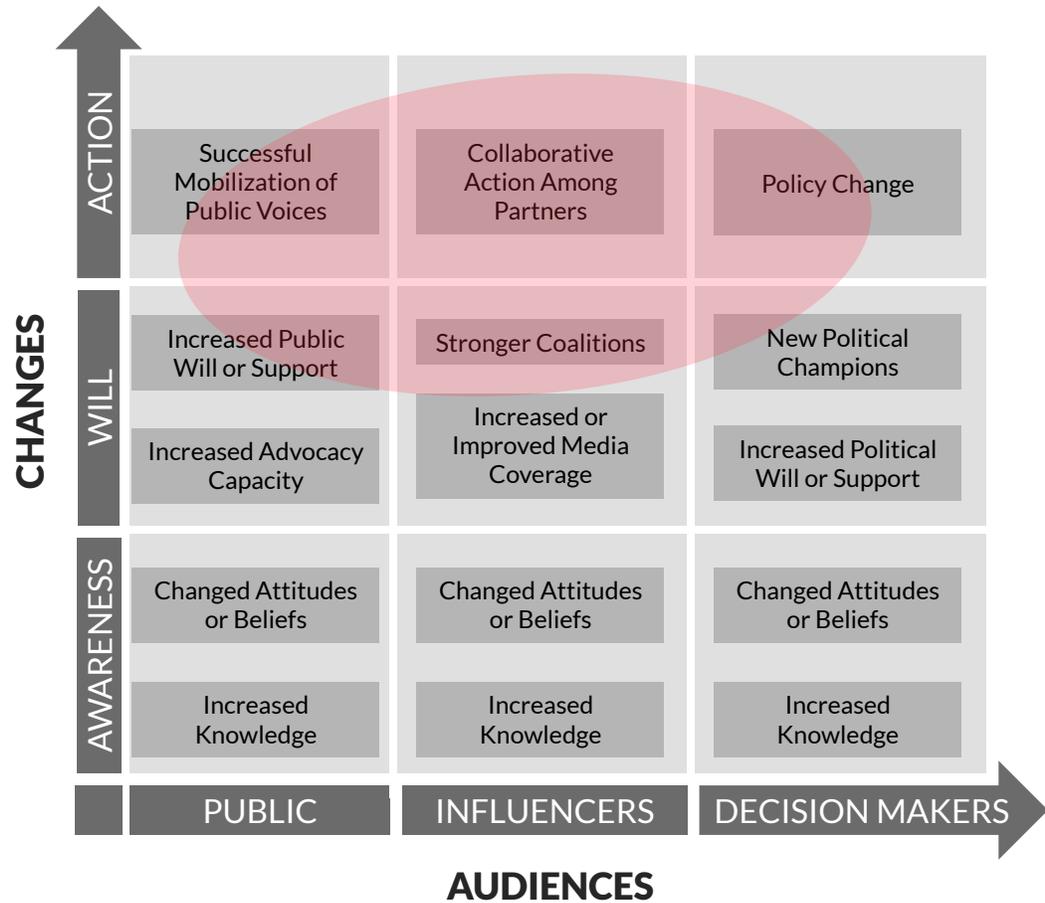
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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Klein, G. (2007). *Performing a project premortem*. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(9), 18-19.



The next figure then illustrates how the mapping of an advocacy strategy can help to guide decisions about which interim outcomes are relevant to that strategy. In this case, based on where the hypothetical strategy is positioned in the framework, advocates might consider capturing the extent to which public voices engaged in sustained mobilization (who is acting, what are they doing, and are they staying engaged), along with the extent to which a coalition grows stronger and collaborative partners are engaging in coordinated action. Appendix B offers definitions of each interim outcome along with example indicators for tracking whether those outcomes are occurring.

## Mapping Relevant Interim Outcomes



**TIP:** Make plans for how the interim outcomes might be captured as the advocacy strategy is implemented. Remember that these are only *theories* of how change is expected to occur. Measurement of interim outcomes will signal how those theories are playing out in practice and if strategies need adjustment.

## CONCLUSION

The tool presented here for thinking about and articulating a theory of change takes into account the distinctive nature of advocacy strategy. It is audience-focused, facilitates thinking about the commonly collaborative nature of advocacy efforts and how efforts complement or misalign, and helps users to think about how to track progress and identify needed changes as theories play out in practice.

Just as advocacy strategy is expected to evolve, so is the theory of change behind it. It is important to revisit questions in the tool periodically, checking back in on underlying assumptions, how partners or the opposition have shifted their focus, or if new future scenarios have emerged.

## APPENDIX A

### DEFINITIONS OF TACTICS

<b>Advocacy Capacity Building</b>	Using financial support, training, coaching, or mentoring to increase the ability of an organization or group to lead, adapt, manage, and technically implement an advocacy strategy.
<b>Champion Development</b>	Recruiting high-profile individuals to adopt an issue and publicly advocate for it.
<b>Stronger Coalitions</b>	Unifying advocacy voices by bringing together individuals, groups, or organizations that agree on a particular issue or goal.
<b>Communications and Messaging</b>	Transmitting information to target audiences to influence how an issue is presented, discussed, or perceived.
<b>Community Mobilization</b>	Creating or building on a community-based groundswell of support for an issue or position.
<b>Community Organizing</b>	Working with people in communities to develop the capacity to advocate on their own behalf.
<b>Demonstration Programs</b>	Implementing a policy proposal on a small scale in one or several sites to show how it can work.
<b>Influencer Education</b>	Telling people who are influential in the policy arena about an issue or position, and about its broad or impassioned support.
<b>Leadership Development</b>	Increasing the capacity (through training, coaching, or mentoring) of individuals to lead others to take action in support of an issue or position.
<b>Litigation</b>	Using the judicial system to move policy by filing lawsuits, civil actions, and other advocacy tactics.
<b>Media Advocacy</b>	Pitching the print, broadcast, or electronic media to get visibility for an issue with specific audiences.
<b>Model Legislation</b>	Developing a specific policy solution (and proposed policy language) for the issue or problem being addressed.
<b>Policy Analysis and Research</b>	Systematically investigating an issue or problem to better define it or identify possible solutions.
<b>Policymaker Education</b>	Telling policymakers and candidates about an issue or position, and about its broad or impassioned support.
<b>Political Will Campaign</b>	Communications (in-person, media, social media, etc.) to increase the willingness of policymakers to act in support of an issue or policy proposal.
<b>Public Awareness Campaigns</b>	Communications with the public that increase recognition that a problem exists or familiarity with a policy proposal.
<b>Public Education</b>	Telling the public (or segments of the public) about an issue or position, and about its broad or impassioned support.
<b>Public Forums</b>	Group gatherings and discussions that are open to the public and help to make an advocacy case on an issue.
<b>Public Polling</b>	Surveying the public via phone or online to collect data for use in advocacy messages.
<b>Public Will Campaign</b>	Communications to increase the willingness of a target audience (non-policymakers) to act in support of an issue or policy proposal.
<b>Regulatory Feedback</b>	Providing information about existing policy rules and regulations to policymakers or others who have the authority to act on the issue and put change in motion.
<b>Voter Outreach</b>	Conveying an issue or position to specific groups of voters in advance of an election.

## APPENDIX B

### DEFINITIONS OF INTERIM OUTCOMES AND EXAMPLE INDICATORS

INTERIM OUTCOME	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE INDICATORS
<b>Changed Attitudes or Beliefs</b>	Target audiences' feelings or affect about an issue or policy proposal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of audience members with favorable attitudes toward the issue or interest</li> <li>• Percentage of audience members saying issue is important to them</li> </ul>
<b>Collaborative Action Among Partners</b>	Individuals or groups coordinating their work and acting together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New organizations signing on as collaborators</li> <li>• Policy agenda alignment among collaborators</li> <li>• Collaborative actions taken among organizations (e.g., joint meetings, aligning of messages)</li> </ul>
<b>Increased Advocacy Capacity</b>	The ability of an organization or coalition to lead, adapt, manage, and technically implement an advocacy strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge about advocacy, mobilizing, or organizing tactics</li> <li>• Improved media skills and contacts</li> <li>• Increased ability to get and use data</li> </ul>
<b>Increased Knowledge</b>	Audience recognition that a problem exists or familiarity with a policy proposal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of audience members with knowledge of an issue</li> <li>• Website activity for portions of website with advocacy-related information</li> </ul>
<b>Increased or Improved Media Coverage</b>	Quantity and/or quality of coverage generated in print, broadcast, or electronic media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of media citations of advocate research or products</li> <li>• Number of stories successfully placed in the media (e.g., op-eds)</li> <li>• Number of advocate (or trained spokesperson) citations in the media</li> <li>• Number of media articles reflecting preferred issue framing</li> </ul>
<b>Increased Political Will or Support</b>	Willingness of policymakers to act in support of an issue or policy proposal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of citations of advocate <i>products or ideas</i> in policy deliberations/policies</li> <li>• Number of elected officials who publicly support the advocacy effort</li> <li>• Number of issue mentions in policymaker speeches (or debates)</li> <li>• Number and party representation of bill sponsors and co-sponsors</li> <li>• Number of votes for or against specific legislation</li> </ul>
<b>Increased Public Will or Support</b>	Willingness of a (non-policymaker) target audience to act in support of an issue or policy proposal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of audience members willing to take action on behalf of a specific issue</li> <li>• Attendance at advocacy events (e.g., public forums, marches, rallies)</li> </ul>
<b>New Political Champions</b>	High-profile individuals who adopt an issue and publicly advocate for it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New champions or stakeholders recruited</li> <li>• New constituencies represented among champions</li> <li>• Champion actions to support issue (e.g., speaking out, signing on)</li> </ul>
<b>Stronger Coalitions</b>	Mutually beneficial relationships with other organizations or individuals who support or participate in an advocacy strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number, type, and/or strength of organizational relationships developed</li> <li>• Number, type, and/or strength of relationships with unlikely partners</li> </ul>
<b>Successful Mobilization of Public Voices</b>	Increase in the number of individuals who can be counted on for sustained advocacy or action on an issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New advocates recruited</li> <li>• New constituencies represented among advocates</li> <li>• New advocate actions to support issue</li> </ul>