



‘The Overton Window’: Made in Michigan

By Joseph G. Lehman

Summary

The title of a new bestselling novel, “The Overton Window,” draws on a concept created by the late Joseph Overton, formerly senior vice president of the Mackinac Center.

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Glenn Beck’s new novel, “The Overton Window,” was a bestseller even before it was released a few weeks ago. Although the Mackinac Center was not involved in the creation of the book or the fictional tale it tells, the Center did originate the Overton Window concept that Beck adapted for his story.

The “Overton Window of Political Possibility” is the term my colleagues and I gave to a theory of change developed by the late Joseph Overton, once the Mackinac Center’s senior vice president. After Joe died in 2003, I built a presentation around his idea, and I still use it to show how think tanks can shift public policy.

Joe shared his abstract concept with me in the mid-1990s. He observed that any collection of public policies on a given topic can be arranged in order from more free to less free (or from less government intervention to more). To avoid comparison with the left-right political spectrum, he arranged the policies from bottom (less free) to top (more free).

At any one time, some group of adjacent policies along the freedom spectrum fall into a “window of political possibility.” Policies inside the window are politically acceptable, meaning officeholders believe they can support the policies and survive the next election. Policies outside the window, either higher or lower, are politically unacceptable at the moment. If you shift the position or size of the window, you change what is politically possible.

Many believe that politicians move the window, but that’s actually rare. In our understanding, politicians typically don’t determine what is politically acceptable; more often, they react to it and validate it. Generally speaking, policy change follows political change, which itself follows social change. The most durable policy changes are those that are undergirded by strong social movements.

For example, Prohibition was a policy change driven by a social movement that did not prove strong enough to sustain the policy. Certain environmental policies that have proven durable are backed by strong social movements that favor those policies — or at least the idea they represent.

When social and political forces bring about change, the window of political possibility shifts up or down the spectrum and can also expand to include more policy options or shrink to include fewer. The window presents

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This graphical example of the Overton Window in education policy helps conceptualize changes in public opinion and political acceptability. You can find the interactive window at TheOvertonWindow.com.

a menu of policy choices to politicians: From their point of view, relatively safe choices are inside the window and politically riskier choices (or bolder ones, if you prefer) are outside.

Lawmakers who support policies outside the window are one of two kinds — true leaders who have the rare ability to shift the window by themselves, or politicians who risk electoral defeat because they are perceived as out of touch. This explains why key lawmakers in 2009 and 2010 were reluctant to support a massive federal health care bill seen as unpopular with the people. Officeholders knew a vote outside the window would subject them to the political Furies, as in fact it has. This year's elections will tell if the bill's supporters suffer "Overton's Revenge," the penalty for overshooting the window.

The Overton Window doesn't describe everything, but it describes one big thing: Politicians will rarely support whatever policy they choose whenever they choose; rather, they will do what they feel they can do without risking electoral defeat, given the current political environment shaped by ideas, social movements and societal sensibilities.

Think tanks research the effects of various policy proposals and generate new ideas that can attract a groundswell of popular and political support, sometimes years later. Ideas, even good ones, can take years to overcome barriers erected by defenders of the status quo.

That's why it's important for the Mackinac Center and others to educate citizens on the nation's founding principles of limited government and free markets. Public policies rooted in those ideas produced freedom and prosperity unmatched by any other society in history. The same policies can return us to prosperity now. A people animated by our nation's founding principles will shift the window of political possibility toward greater freedom.

The politicians will ultimately follow.

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