

## Process guide | Assessing and opening policy windows

### Objectives

- Introduce the idea of ‘policy windows’ and ‘political opportunity structure’ and develop a shared understanding of these ideas
- Critically evaluate the political opportunity structure apparent in current campaign/s
- Practice applying an analytical tool that can be used to assess potential campaigns.

**Time required:** 60 minutes

### How it's done:

#### Step 1: Diagnosis [5-10 minutes; facilitator #1]

- Ask the group: “What do we know about political opportunity? What does this idea mean to you and your group? Do you use this language in your campaigning? To mean what?”
- By drawing on people’s reflections and experience, learn a little about how people use this expression.
- Introduce Kingdon’s idea of a policy window without referring specifically (yet) to the handout. Problems, proposals and politics are all necessary: there needs to be a soundly researched, articulated and understood problem, a credible and widely-supported solution and a political landscape that makes real change viable. Note that theories about ‘political opportunity structures’ are just one way to explore the policy process and the idea of a policy ‘window’.
- Establish some common ground; a shared definition (this can be quite loose for the moment).

#### Step 2: Introduce and model the checklist [10-15 minutes; facilitator #2]

- Distribute the two-page resources, including the checklist created by Barkhorn, Huttner and Blau.
- One of the facilitators should have a policy campaign ready to use to illustrate the framework – ideally a policy debate that ticks most of the boxes in this checklist. Walk people through the nine questions, modeling the process. Make this as participatory as possible.
- ALTERNATIVELY, ask a member of the group to nominate a policy debate (perhaps one that you expect many people in the room will be familiar with), and walk through the nine questions together. How does this policy debate stack up? Is there a significant policy window?

#### Step 3: Small group exercise [25 minutes; facilitator #2]

- Ask people to form small groups of 4-5. Make time for people to move and get comfortable on chairs or the floor. Explain that the next step will be to apply the framework to our own campaigns.
- Ask people to briefly introduce themselves (if that hasn’t happened already), then to (very) briefly describe a policy campaign they’re interested and/or involved in. **What specific policy changes are you are trying to achieve with your campaign?**
- Explain that each group needs to select one of these policies for the exercise; ideally one that most people know something about (the policy and the politics surrounding it). Once that’s been chosen, ensure the group is clear about what success would look like in the campaign. What is the desired policy outcome?

*Note: During the small group discussion, facilitators should circulate and check progress. In particular, check that folks are clear about what each question means. If it appears that any question/s need clarification for multiple groups, consider interrupting all groups to provide that clarification. Perhaps one of the groups is clear about the question’s meaning and can model its application for others.*

#### Step 4 (optional): Small group discussion [15 minutes; facilitator #1]

*If the workshop participants are community organisers, prompt the small groups to discuss:*

- If you've identified a viable policy window and winnable campaign, how would you organise around the policy solution? (Questions 5, 6 and 7 were specifically focused on community organising.) How would you further open the policy window or opportunity by organising?
- Which allies would you prioritise working with?
- What ideas do you have about building a coalition?
- How would you go about mobilising community members? *Who* would be most likely to take action and what do you imagine them *doing*?

#### **Step 5: Plenary discussion [15-20 minutes]**

- How was that? What showed up?
- What did you learn about the political opportunities apparent in these policy campaigns?
- Who confirmed that there is a significant political opportunity? Tell us a bit about that.
- Who discovered that there is limited political opportunity to advance your policy solution at this time? Tell us a bit about that.
- What would it take to increase that opportunity or further open the policy window?
- Did the process highlight things we don't know yet? Did you identify research needs or information gaps?
- How do you imagine you might apply this tool (in your campaign / in your organisation)?

**Source:** James Whelan and Fee Mozeley, the Change Agency <http://www.thechangeagency.org>

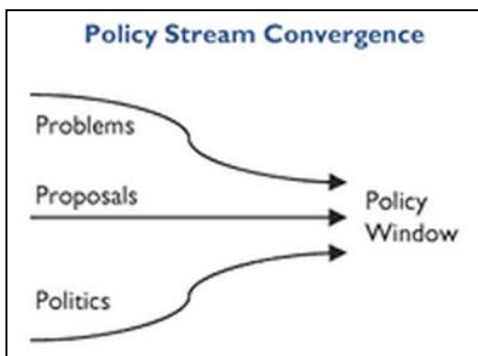
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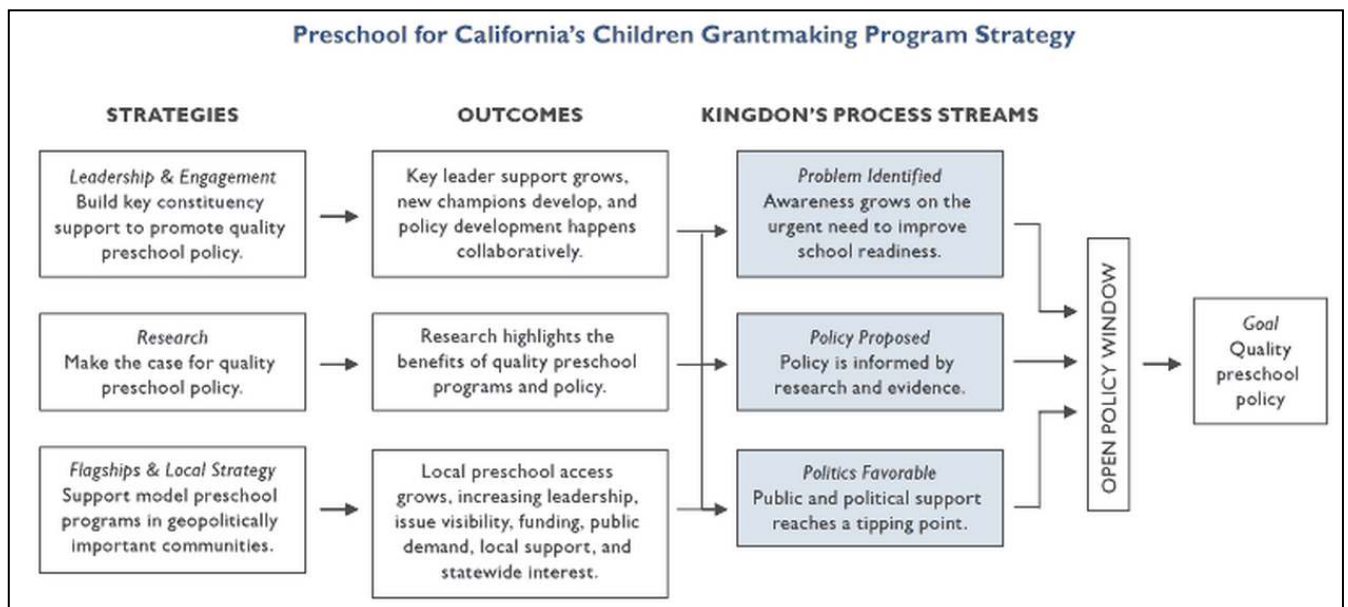
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## Resources | Assessing and opening policy windows

### Resource 1: Kingdon's 'policy window' framework



Elevating an idea on the policy agenda requires investments in more than one element and in the ways that the elements can complement one another. Investing in research alone to define a problem, for example, has less chance of success than investing in problem definition and advocacy for proposals that get attached to that problem. The likelihood of successful agenda setting substantially increases if all three elements—problem, proposal, and politics—are linked in a single package.



Note: The top and bottom process stream boxes in this diagram ('problem identified' and 'politics favourable') appear to be inverted.

Source: 'Evaluation Based on Theories of the Policy Process', Evaluation Exchange Volume XIII, Number 1&2, Spring 2007, <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/advocacy-and-policy-change/evaluation-based-on-theories-of-the-policy-process>

### Resource 2: Policy Window

The policy window is an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems. Policy entrepreneurs must be prepared, their pet proposal at the ready, their special problem well-documented in order to realise their goals while the policy window opens. Then, the separate three streams come together. A problem is recognised, a solution is developed and available in the policy community, a political change makes it the right time for policy change, and potential constraints are not severe.

A policy window opens when:

- There is a new problem or definition of a problem.
- There is a change in administration or Parliament.
- There is a change in the national mood.
- Policy windows open sometimes predictably, other times unpredictably.

A policy window closes when:

- Problem has been seemingly fixed.
- People think it's not going anywhere.
- A crisis passes, or there may be a key personnel change.
- No single alternative emerges

**Source:** Summary of John Kingdon (2011) *Agenda, alternatives and public policies*,

<https://yuheisuzuki.wordpress.com/2013/02/06/summary-john-w-kingdon-agendas-alternatives-and-public-policies-update-edition-with-an-epilogue-on-health-care-2nd-edition/>

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### **Resource 3: The Advocacy assessment framework**

Nine conditions are essential to a successful policy campaign:

1. Functioning venue(s) for adoption: The relevant legislative, legal, and regulatory institutions are functioning sufficiently for advocacy to be effective.
2. Open policy window: External events or trends spur demand for the solution.
3. Feasible solution: A feasible solution has been developed and shown to produce the intended benefits.
4. Dynamic master plan: A pragmatic and flexible advocacy strategy and communications plan is ready for execution.
5. Strong campaign leader(s): Central advocates can assemble and lead the resources to execute the strategy and communications plan.
6. Influential support coalition: Allies can sway needed decision-makers and help the campaign leader/s to pursue the solution.
7. Mobilised public: Relevant public audiences actively support the solution and its underlying social principles.
8. Powerful inside champions: Decision-makers who can overcome the opposition support the solution and its underlying principles.
9. Clear implementation path: The implementing institution has the commitment and the ability to execute the solution.

This framework may be used as a checklist, as a rubric or as a quantitative estimator.

**Source:** Ivan Barkhorn, Nathan Huttner & Jason Blau, Spring 2013, 'Assessing Advocacy', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Issue 1, [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/assessing\\_advocacy](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/assessing_advocacy)

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### **Resource 4: Windows of Opportunity (case study)**

Sarah Stachowiak describes and applies Kingdon's framework in her case study of a 17-year struggle for environmentalists, doctors and a broad-based community coalition to close all coal-powered energy plants and get coal out of Ontario.

**Source:** <http://orsimpact.com/blog-post/windows-of-opportunity/>