

PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE: 10 Theories to Inform Advocacy and Policy Change Efforts



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Foreword

The first *Pathways for Change* brief originally was published in 2008 in response to growing interest from evaluators, funders, and advocates to evaluate advocacy and policy change efforts. Since that time, the field of advocacy and policy change evaluation has grown, and theories of change continue to serve as bedrock for evaluative efforts. Given this context, the time is ripe to expand on the original work. This updated brief maintains most of the content from the original piece and provides information on four additional theories. It continues to focus on theories most directly applicable to either understanding how policy change happens or how specific advocacy tactics play out; this brief does not focus on more comprehensive social science theories. Additionally, at the time of the original brief, the utility and application of this work were largely theoretical. This update includes an expanded section on how evaluators, advocates, and funders can apply these theories to advocacy and policy work.

Introduction

Advocates of all stripes seek changes in policy as a way to achieve impact at a scale and degree of sustainability that differs from what can be achieved through direct services or programs alone. Advocates and funders each come to policy work with a set of beliefs and assumptions about how change will happen, and these beliefs shape their thinking about what conditions are necessary for success, which tactics to undertake in which situations, and what changes need to be achieved along the way.

These worldviews are, in actuality, theories of change, whether or not they have been explicitly stated or documented as such. When articulated as theories of change, these strategy and belief system roadmaps can clarify expectations internally and externally, and they can facilitate more effective planning and evaluation.

This brief lays out 10 theories grounded in diverse disciplines and worldviews that have relevance to the world of advocacy and policy change. These theories can help to untangle beliefs and assumptions about the inner workings of the policy making process and identify causal connections supported by research

to explain how and why a change may or may not occur. This piece is not meant to be comprehensive of all possible relevant theories and approaches; rather, it introduces and illustrates a handful of theories that may be useful to advocates, funders, and evaluators. While the theories included may have broad applicability, the brief is grounded in the context of US domestic policy.

Knowing about existing theories may sharpen your own thinking, provide new ways of looking at the policy world, and give you a leg up on developing your own theory of change. The final section gives concrete examples of the way in which advocates, funders, and evaluators can use this brief in their work.

Defining Theory of Change

Theory of change can be defined as the conceptual model for achieving a collective vision. A theory of change typically addresses the linkages among the strategies, outcomes, and goals that support a broader mission or vision, along with the underlying assumptions that are related to these linkages. Theories of change can be expressed in many forms but ultimately should explain how you get from “here” to “there.”¹

¹ Organizational Research Services. (2007). A guide to measuring advocacy and policy. Prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Seattle, WA.

10 Theories of Change Related to Advocacy and Policy Change Efforts

Brief summaries follow of 10 social science theories of change relevant to advocacy and policy change efforts.² These comprise two types of theories:

Global theories are theories that explain how policy change occurs more broadly, and

Tactical theories are theories from various social science disciplines that apply to common advocacy tactics that are likely part of broader advocacy efforts or campaigns.

Global theories include the following:

1. “Large Leaps” or Punctuated Equilibrium theory
2. “Policy Windows” or Agenda-Setting theory³
3. “Coalition” theory or Advocacy Coalition Framework
4. “Power Politics” or Power Elites theory
5. “Regime” theory

Tactical theories include the following:

1. “Messaging and Frameworks” theory
2. “Media Influence” or Agenda-Setting theory³
3. “Grassroots” or Community Organizing theory
4. “Group Formation” or Self-Categorization theory
5. “Diffusion” theory or Diffusion of Innovations

² Overviews of the theories are based on the seminal works that undergird them. Summarizing complex theories into one page or less necessarily distills the information significantly. For greater depth or nuance, please see the Bibliography to access the original sources.

³ Both Kingdon (“Policy Windows”) and McCombs and Shaw (“Media Influence”) use the term “Agenda-Setting Theory” to quite different ends. To be true to the original authors, we use the term for both. To differentiate between them, we refer to Kingdon’s work as “Policy Windows” and McCombs and Shaw’s work as “Media Influence.”

Matrix of Theories

	THEORY (Key Authors)	DISCIPLINE	HOW CHANGE HAPPENS	WHEN THIS THEORY MAY BE USEFUL
GLOBAL THEORIES	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 You have strong media-related capacity
	Policy Windows or Agenda-Setting theory (Kingdon)	Political Science	Policy can be changed during a window of opportunity when advocates can successfully connect two or more components of the policy process (e.g., the way a problem is defined, the policy solution to the problem, and/or the political climate of their issue).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can address multiple streams simultaneously (e.g., problem definition, policy solutions, and/or political climate) You have internal capacity to create, identify, and act on policy windows
	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 You have a strong group of allies with a common goal
	Power Politics or Power Elites theory (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"> You have one or more key allies in a position of power on the issue Focus may be on incremental administrative or rule changes
	Regime Theory (Stone)	Political Science	Policy change happens through the support and empowerment of policy makers by a close-knit body of influential individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You know or suspect that a coalition of non-politicians is deeply involved in policy making You have access to or can become part of this coalition or regime
TACTICAL THEORIES	Messaging and Frameworks or Prospect theory (Tversky & Kahneman)	Psychology	Individual's preferences will vary depending on how options are 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 salience of an issue
	Media Influence or Agenda-Setting theory (McCombs & Shaw)	Communications	Political issues on the public's agenda will depend on the extent of coverage a given issue receives by mass news media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have strong media-related capacity You want to put the issue on the radar of the broader public
	Grassroots or Community Organizing theory (Alinsky, Bik/len)	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 Your organization's role in an issue is as a "convener" or "capacity-builder" rather than as a "driver"
	Group Formation or Self-Categorization theory (Turner, Tajfel)	Social Psychology	Policy change can be achieved when individuals identify with groups and subsequently act in a way that is consistent with that social group or category membership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are looking to build or tighten your base of support Cohesion among your organization's members is a prerequisite for change
	Diffusion theory or Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers)	Sociology	Change happens when a new idea for a program or policy is communicated to a critical mass, who perceives it as superseding the current policy/program (or lack thereof) and thus, adopts the idea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The focus is on a new idea for a program or policy You have trusted messengers and champions to model or communicate the innovation

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.^{4, 5}

Global Theories

Compared with Tactical theories, Global theories represent more encompassing worldviews about how policy change happens. Advocates may be more successful if they operate within one of these frameworks rather than several simultaneously. While some Global theories share similar assumptions or components, explicitly acknowledging which theory resonates can help groups make focused strategic choices about possible tactics and allow them to leverage the assumptions inherent to that point of view more effectively.

GLOBAL **1** THEORY “LARGE LEAPS” Theory of Change

Believers of the Large Leaps theory recognize that when conditions are right, change can happen in sudden, large bursts that represent a significant departure from the past, as opposed to small incremental changes over time that usually do not reflect a radical change from the status quo. This 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.

Large Leaps theory posits that large-scale change can occur when an issue is defined differently, when new actors get involved, or when the issue becomes more salient and receives heightened media and broader public attention.

The theory holds that conditions for large-scale change are ripe when the following occur:

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

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

⁴ The strategies shown in the maps are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

⁵ Strong advocacy capacity within an organization is key to success—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 10 theories.

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 allows many different 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).

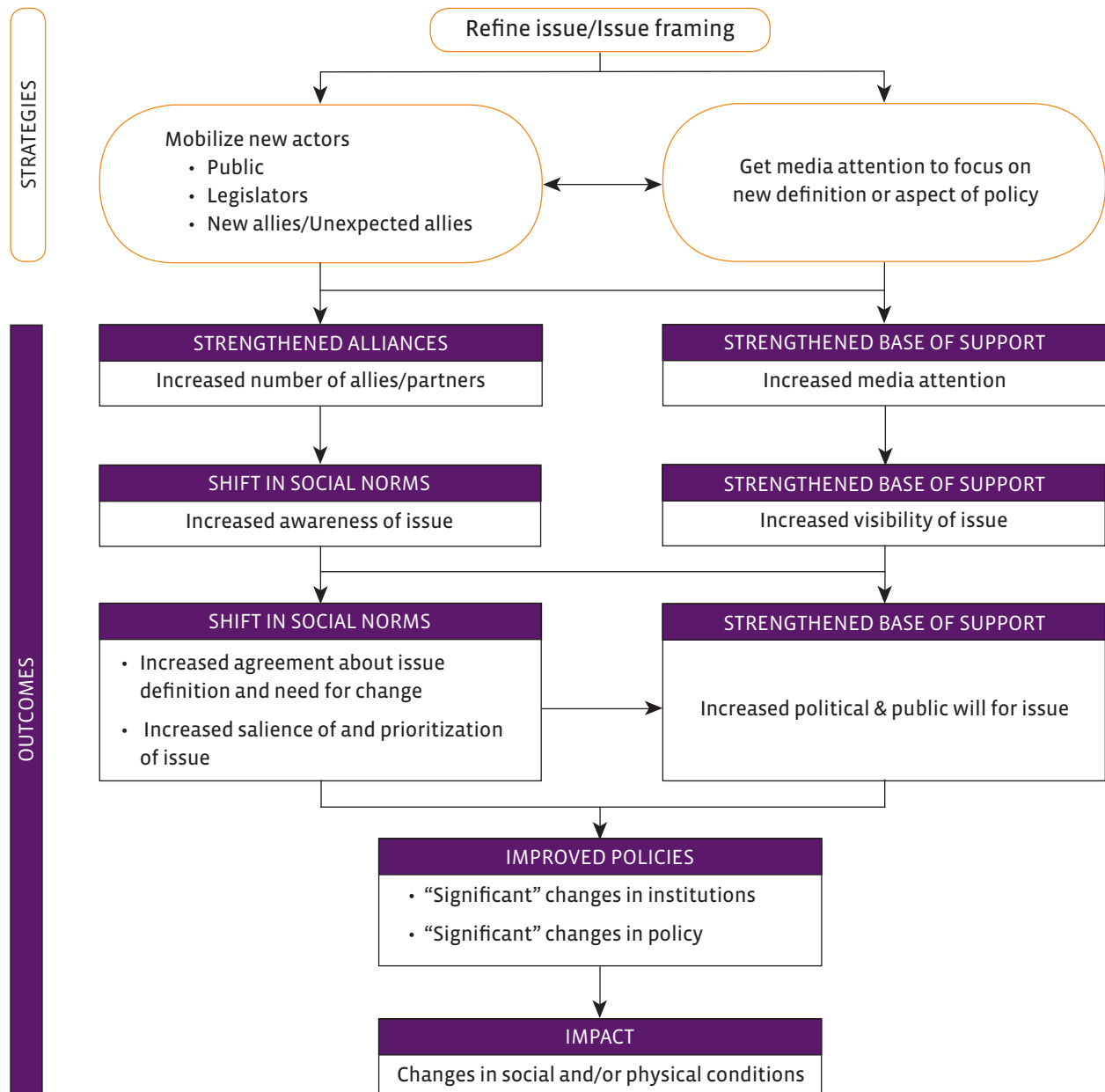
Application to Advocacy

- 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.
- Promising strategies include issue framing, mobilizing supporters, and media advocacy.

Reading the Outcome Maps

The outcome maps related to particular advocacy strategies and tactics featured in this brief show the potential theoretical connection between that strategy through to policy change and ultimate impact. Solid lines represent outcomes clearly stated in the seminal research. Outcomes connected by dotted lines are hypothetical and are illustrative of how that tactic ultimately supports the longer-term policy change and impact desired by advocates.

“LARGE LEAPS” Theory of Change



“POLICY WINDOW” Theory of Change

The Policy Windows theory is 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” related to the policy system:

1. **Problems:** The way social conditions become defined as “a problem” to policy makers, including the problem’s attributes, its status, the degree of social consciousness of the issue, and whether the problem is perceived as solvable with clear alternatives.
2. **Policies:** The ideas generated to address problems.
3. **Politics:** Political factors, including the “national mood” (e.g., appetite for “big government”), campaigns by interest groups and advocates, and changes in elected officials.

According to this theory, to increase the likelihood that an issue will receive serious attention or be placed on the policy agenda, at least two of the streams need to converge at critical moments or “policy windows.” Policy windows are windows of opportunity that arise when there is the possibility for policy change.

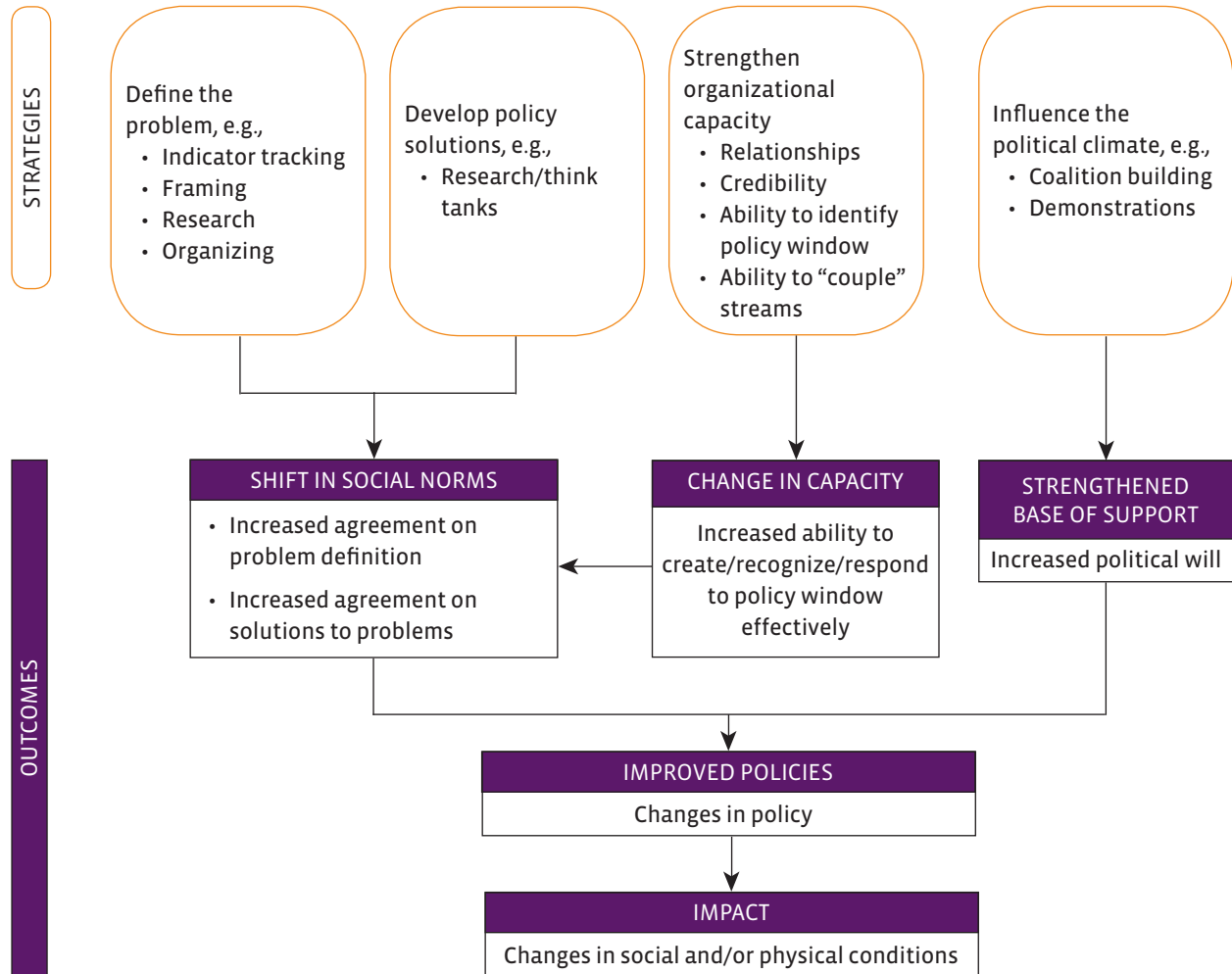
Underlying Assumptions

- 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 gained prominence on the agenda (even if its rise was independent of their efforts).
- Success is most likely when all three components (problems, 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). Policy windows also can be created.
- The way a problem is defined makes a difference as to whether and where the problem is placed on the agenda. Problem definition also has a value or 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 policy maker and public values.
- To effectively recognize and take advantage of open policy windows, advocates must possess knowledge, time, relationships, and good reputations.

Application to Advocacy⁶

- Promising strategies include:
 - impacting problem definition (i.e., 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 (e.g., through research, publications, and the like), and;
 - influencing the political climate (e.g., coalition building, demonstrations, and media advocacy).
- Advocates and organizations need adequate capacity to create and/or recognize policy windows and then respond appropriately.

“POLICY WINDOW” Theory of Change



⁶ To study an application of Kingdon’s theory to an advocacy effort, see: Coffman, J. (2007). Evaluation based on theories of the policy process. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 13(1 & 2), 2–6. Retrieved July 3, 2013, from <http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/advocacy-and-policy-change/evaluation-based-on-theories-of-the-policy-process>.

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 and organizations outside of government with the same core policy beliefs.

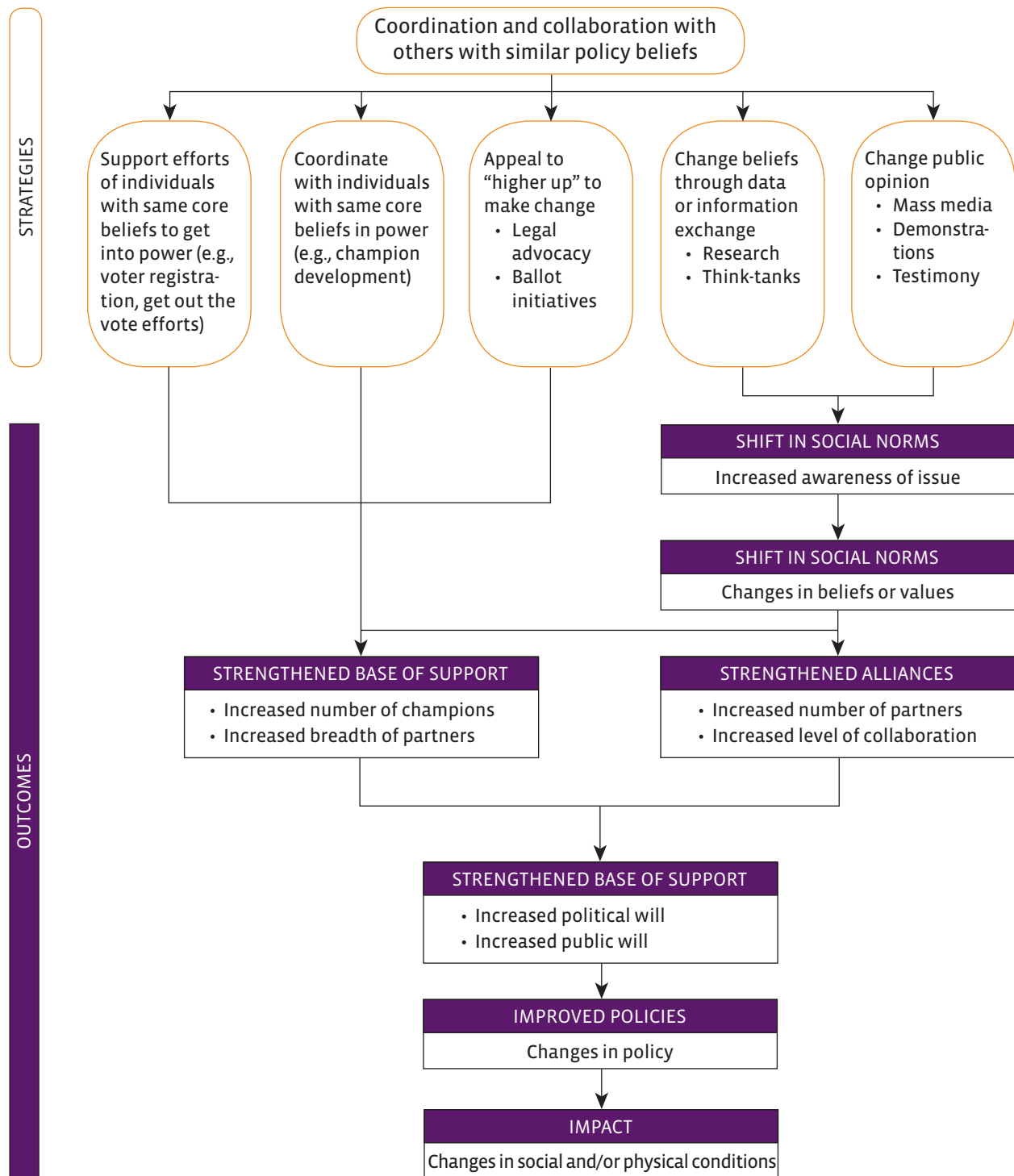
Underlying Assumptions

- Coalitions are held together by agreement over core beliefs about policies. Secondary beliefs about how policies are executed are less critical to alignment (e.g., administrative rules, budgetary allocations, statutory revision).
- Diverse groups can operate effectively and efficiently due to shared core beliefs; in other words, little time is needed to reach shared understanding.
- Core beliefs are resistant to change, unless
 - major external events, such as changes in socio-economic conditions or public opinion, are skillfully exploited by proponents of change; or
 - new learning about a policy surfaces across coalitions that changes views about it.
- Policies are unlikely to change unless
 - the group supporting the status quo is no longer in power; or
 - change is imposed by a hierarchically superior jurisdiction.

Application to Advocacy

- Coalitions can identify and reach out to diverse groups with similar core policy beliefs (e.g., unlikely allies).
- Coalitions typically will explore and pursue multiple avenues for change (e.g., engaging in legal advocacy and working on changing public opinion), often simultaneously, to find a route that will bear fruit.
- 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; or
 - changing perceptions about policies through research and information exchange.

“COALITION” Theory of Change



“POWER POLITICS” Theory of Change

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 sociological theory has a long history, including in 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.

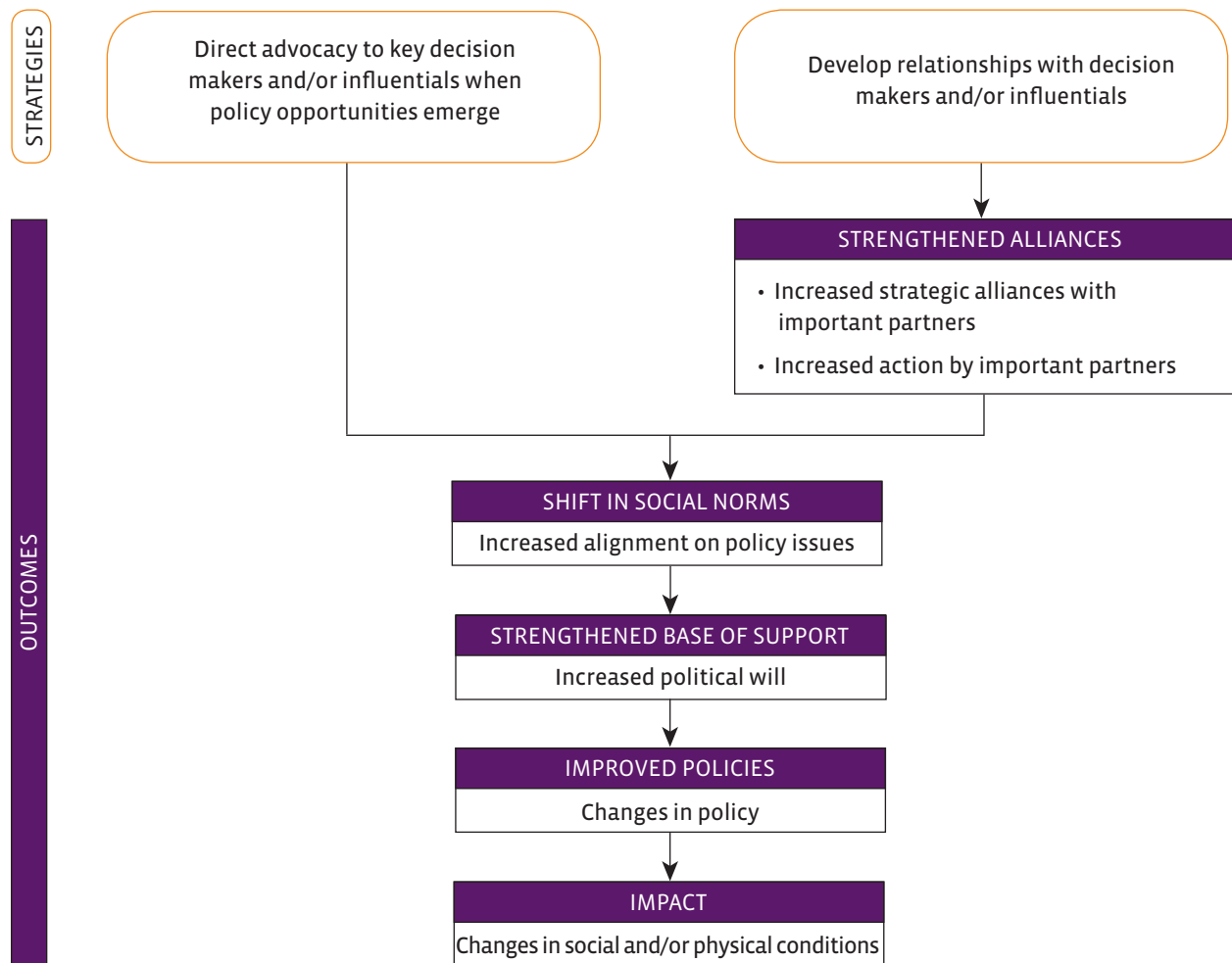
Underlying Assumptions

- 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; and
 - the rest of the population, including activists, the attentive public, voters, and non-participants.
- Power can be used in different ways, including the following:
 - direct influence (i.e., when an individual participates in the actual decision making);
 - indirect influence (i.e., when an individual influences others who decide policy); and
 - implicit power (i.e., when individuals are influenced by the anticipated reaction of other individuals or groups).
- Elites or influentials can be figures of the establishment (e.g., legislators, party officials) or other politically significant strategic elites, such as senior civil servants, managers of important economic enterprises, leaders of mass organizations, leading professionals, prominent intellectuals, journalists, or religious leaders.
- Influence in one policy area does not necessarily confer influence in others.

Application to Advocacy

- 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.
- Promising strategies include relationship development and communication with those who have influence.

“POWER POLITICS” Theory of Change



Regime theory, largely attributed to Clarence Stone, posits that government must work collectively with public and private interests to achieve its aims and outcomes. These collective groups are called “regimes” and are the formal and informal groups that coalesce around a shared, broad agenda. Regimes provide a venue for developing policy agendas, lend support to policy agendas, bring in additional allies for particular policies, and mitigate opposition.

Importantly, members of the regime bring resources to the table, including strategic knowledge, capacity to act on that knowledge, relationships with other allies or constituents, and control of financial and other resources. The membership of a regime depends on the policy purpose, though regimes often include business representatives because of their resources.

Typically, regimes are fairly stable; as regimes work together and develop efficient processes and functions as a group, the costs of changing or starting a new regime are high for policy makers. Additionally, as a regime functions effectively, its ability to attract new allies increases.

Underlying Assumptions

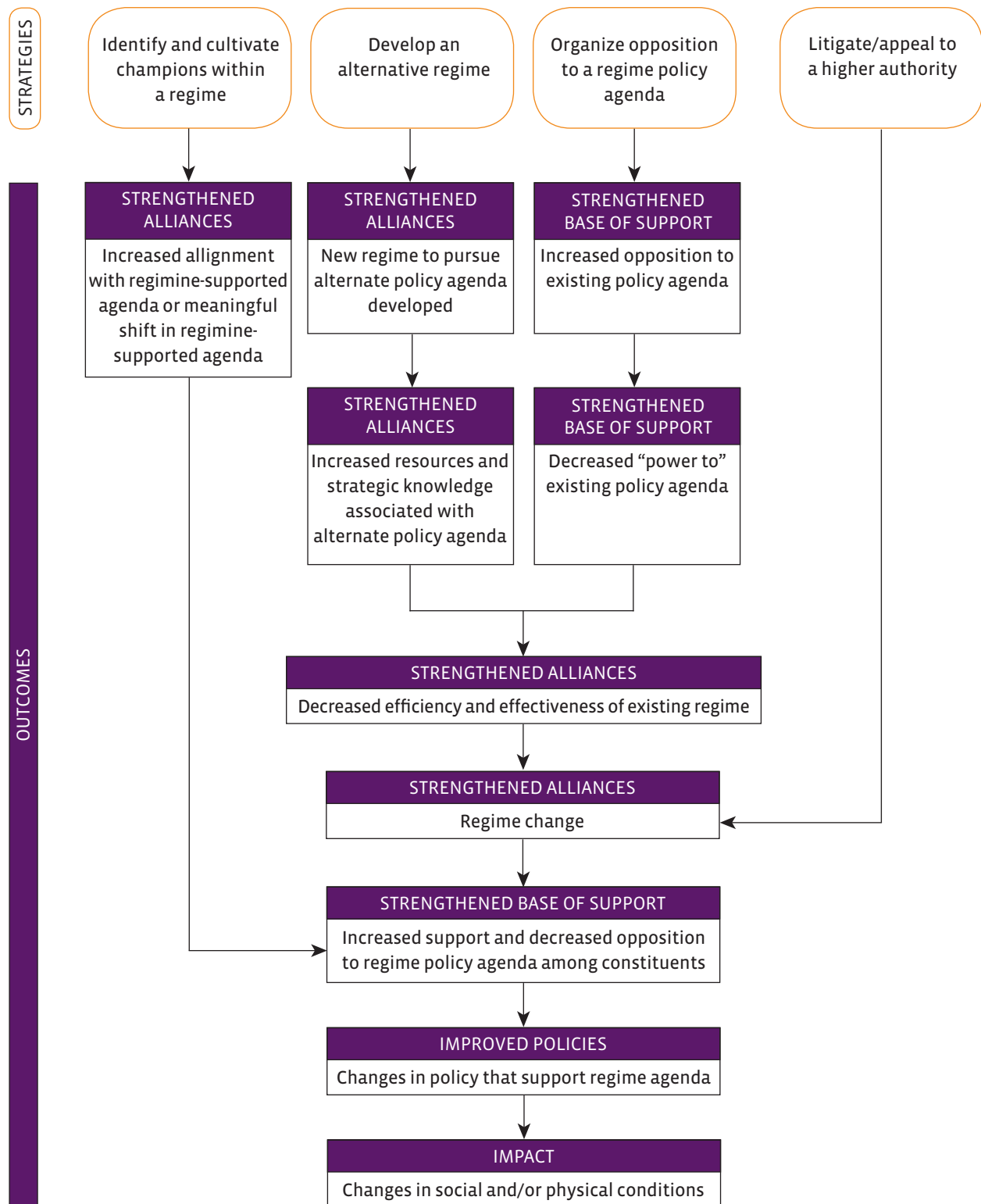
- Core to this work is an understanding of two conceptions of power. First, the “power over” model, in which a more powerful actor compels others into compliance. Second, a “power to” approach, focusing on the ability to have sufficient support to take action, rather than imposing actions on others. In Regime theory, policy makers have interest in affiliating with those with whom they can grow their “power to” govern.
- Individuals are most focused on immediate, near-term opportunities. Regimes can concede “small opportunities” that benefit constituents but still promote the regime’s broader agenda. These concessions make it possible for outside advocates to successfully achieve wins for individual policies, but larger scale change in the regime agenda requires changes to the purpose or makeup of the regime.
- Preferences of individuals are changeable, rather than fixed. Thus, regimes can help change preferences of potential policy opponents by incentivizing the regime’s preferred option or mitigating losses to those negatively impacted by policies. Regimes also can change policy preferences by expanding constituents’ perceptions of what is possible.
- Regimes typically exist outside of electoral accountability and can have a life beyond any single politician.

Application to Advocacy

- Promising strategies include:
 - Working within the regime system: influencing members of a regime or becoming part of a regime;
 - Developing an alternate regime: developing alternative coalitions with comparable capabilities that can work together to create similar efficiencies for transaction costs; and/or

- “Overthrowing” the regime: An opposition approach is unlikely to create access to an existing regime but may be necessary to “overthrow” the regime as policymakers’ “power to” govern is impacted by developing broader public dissatisfaction. Similarly, advocates can engage in litigation to change policies under which the regime must operate.

“REGIME” Theory of Change



Tactical Theories

Unlike Global theories, theories about particular tactics (e.g., “Messaging and Frameworks” or “Diffusion of Innovation” theories) are not mutually exclusive. Many tactics are part of an advocate’s “toolkit” and may be selected, amplified, or minimized depending on the particular context of a campaign or advocacy effort. For example, advocates within a campaign may focus on spreading policy innovations among highly influential insiders (“Diffusion of Innovation” theory) while simultaneously engaging in organizing an affected community (“Grassroots” theory) to have an additional set of advocacy tools at hand.

TACTICAL 1 THEORY

“MESSAGING & FRAMEWORKS” Theory of Change

With the Messaging and Frameworks 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.

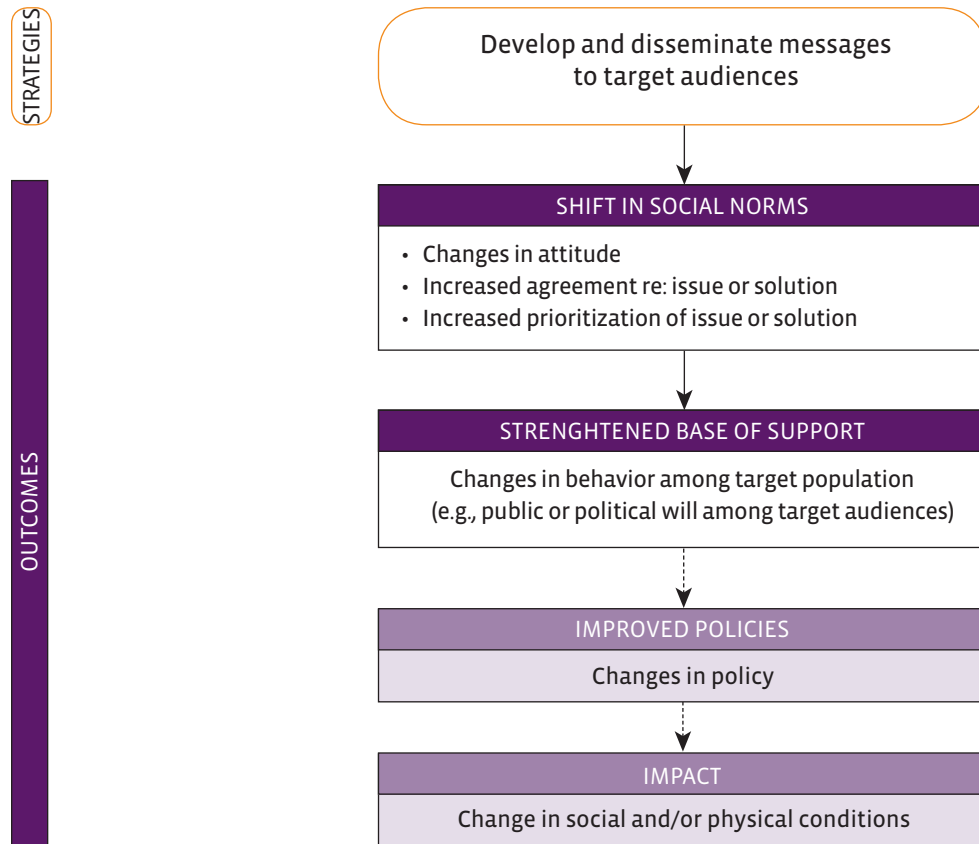
Underlying Assumptions

- 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, targeted communications, or media advocacy.
- This theory is likely embedded as one strategy in a broader communications campaign rather than as a stand-alone activity.

“MESSAGING & FRAMEWORKS” Theory of Change



Max McCombs and Donald Shaw’s Agenda-Setting theory, informally known as Media Influence theory, suggests that mass media, namely news media, significantly influences the public agenda. Political issues that are salient and ever-present in the media tend to be the same issues that the public have awareness of and consider key. Media may or may not shape what constituents think *about* issues, but it generally determines which political or campaign issues voters prioritize. McCombs and Shaw formulated this theory at a time when traditional media entities (e.g., TV, newspaper, news magazine, and radio) owned content creation and served as the central gatekeeper for content distribution. The theory has since matured to make room for the agenda-setting influence of less traditional or elite media entities, namely social media and new media channels. Today, many independent political bloggers generate a readership rivaling that of the traditional news media, and their lack of affiliation with the traditional media monopoly strengthens their perceived neutrality and credibility. The independent blog platform has redistributed gate-keeping power to the extent that traditional news media is considered one force among many competing influences.

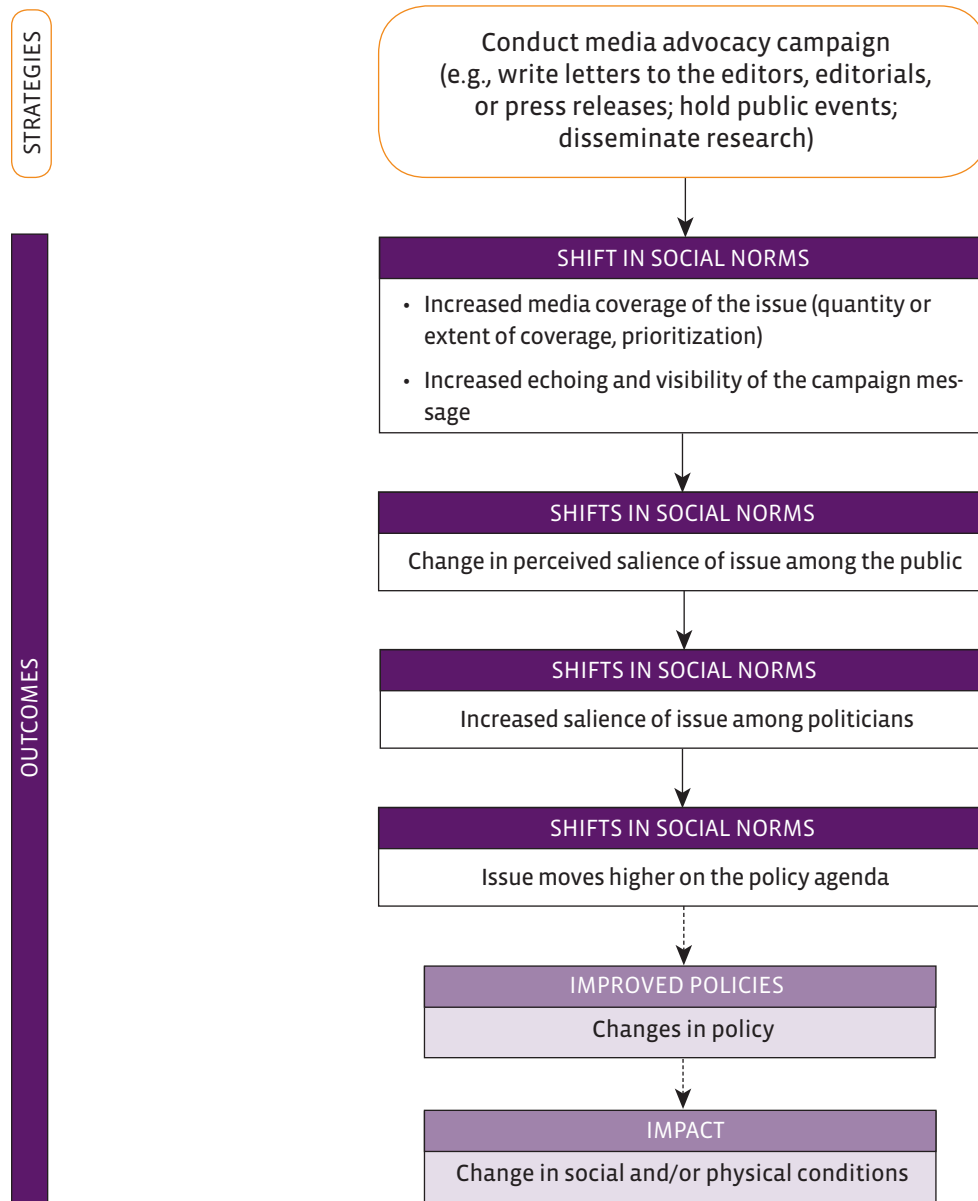
Underlying Assumptions

- Media shapes reality, as opposed to reflecting it.
- The media does have a point of view, and sometimes extreme biases.
- Different media sources have different agenda-setting potential. The size of the audience, the consistency and emphasis of the message, and the degree to which the source is perceived as credible, affect this potential.
- In modern society, the news media is generally one’s primary source of political information. People vary in their appetite for, and attention to, mass media and in their level of political interest. Some individuals actively seek political information; most seem to acquire it with little-to-no effort.

Application to Advocacy

- Efforts are focused on the broader public as opposed to a targeted audience or decision maker and can raise the prominence of an issue, which may or may not change public will around the issue.
- Promising strategies include news media and social media campaigns, as well as general communications.
- According to this theory, media and communications work should be coupled with advocacy toward decision makers who will act upon issues that have risen on the public agenda and/or build a base of support to take action on an agenda that has reached a high level of salience.

“MEDIA INFLUENCE” Theory of Change



“GRASSROOTS” Theory of Change

Unlike the Power Politics theory, grassroots or community organizers view power as changeable and dynamic, not something held exclusively by elites. Proponents of the Grassroots theory believe groups of people can create power by taking mutual action to achieve social change. Saul Alinsky laid out the foundation for this theory in his 1971 book, *Rules for Radicals*.

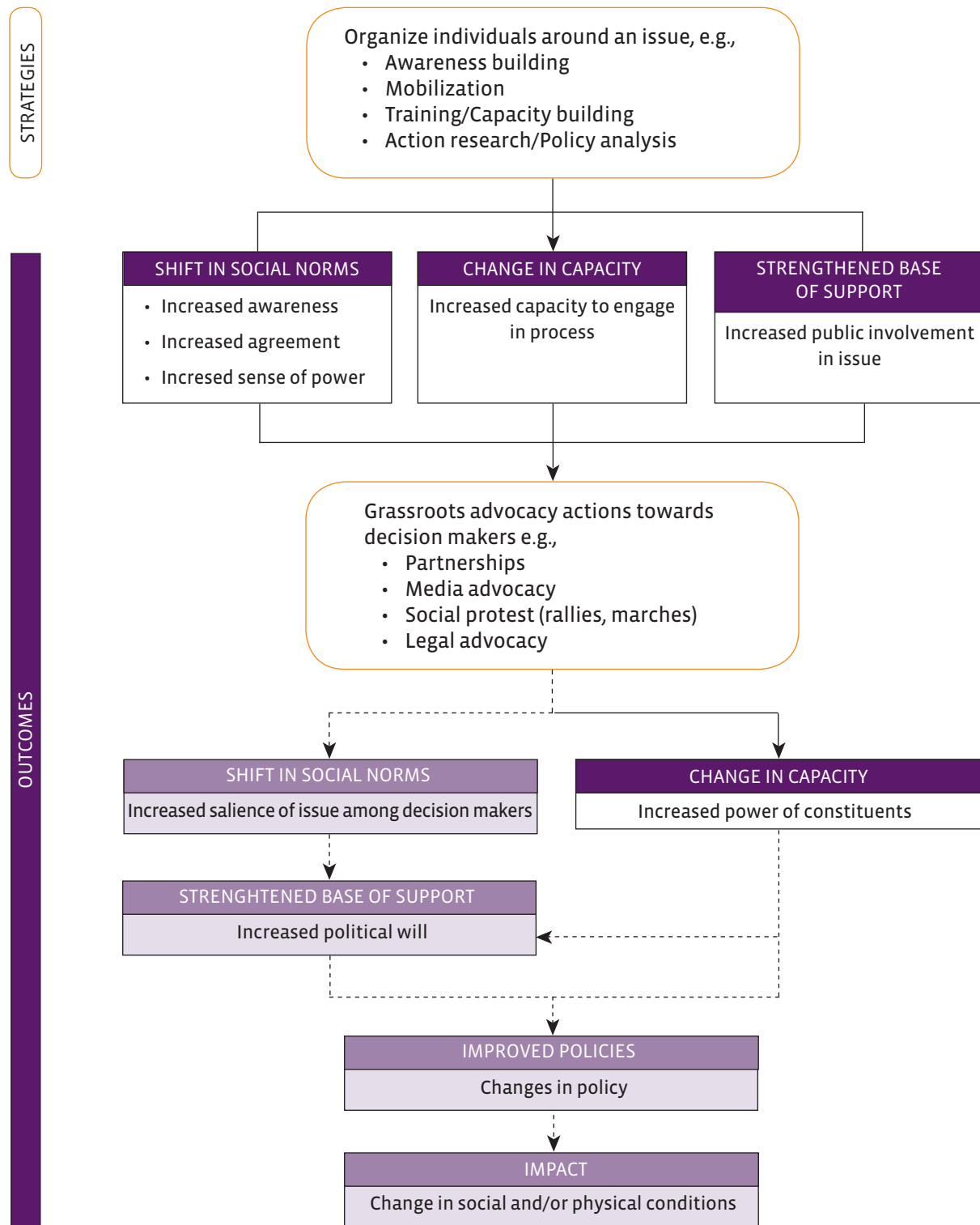
Underlying Assumptions

- Power exists when (or because) people cooperate or obey.
- 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 on changing individuals.

Application to Advocacy

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

“GRASSROOTS” Theory of Change



Self-Categorization theory, attributed to John C. Turner, refers to group formation as the process that makes social cohesion, cooperation, and influence possible. The theory looks at identity—how one perceives and defines him- or herself—as a motivator for group formation. Individuals identify with groups or social categories based on their perceived similarities concerning attitudes, values, experiences, or in the application of advocacy, the desire to collectively solve a problem or accomplish a goal. As members of a distinct social category, individuals learn the norms of that category and assign those norms to themselves (in the same way we might assign stereotypic characteristics to others). Members tend to accentuate, or make salient, in-group norms and similarities (and out-group differences) to stand out relative to neighboring groups and, thus, achieve a positive social identity.

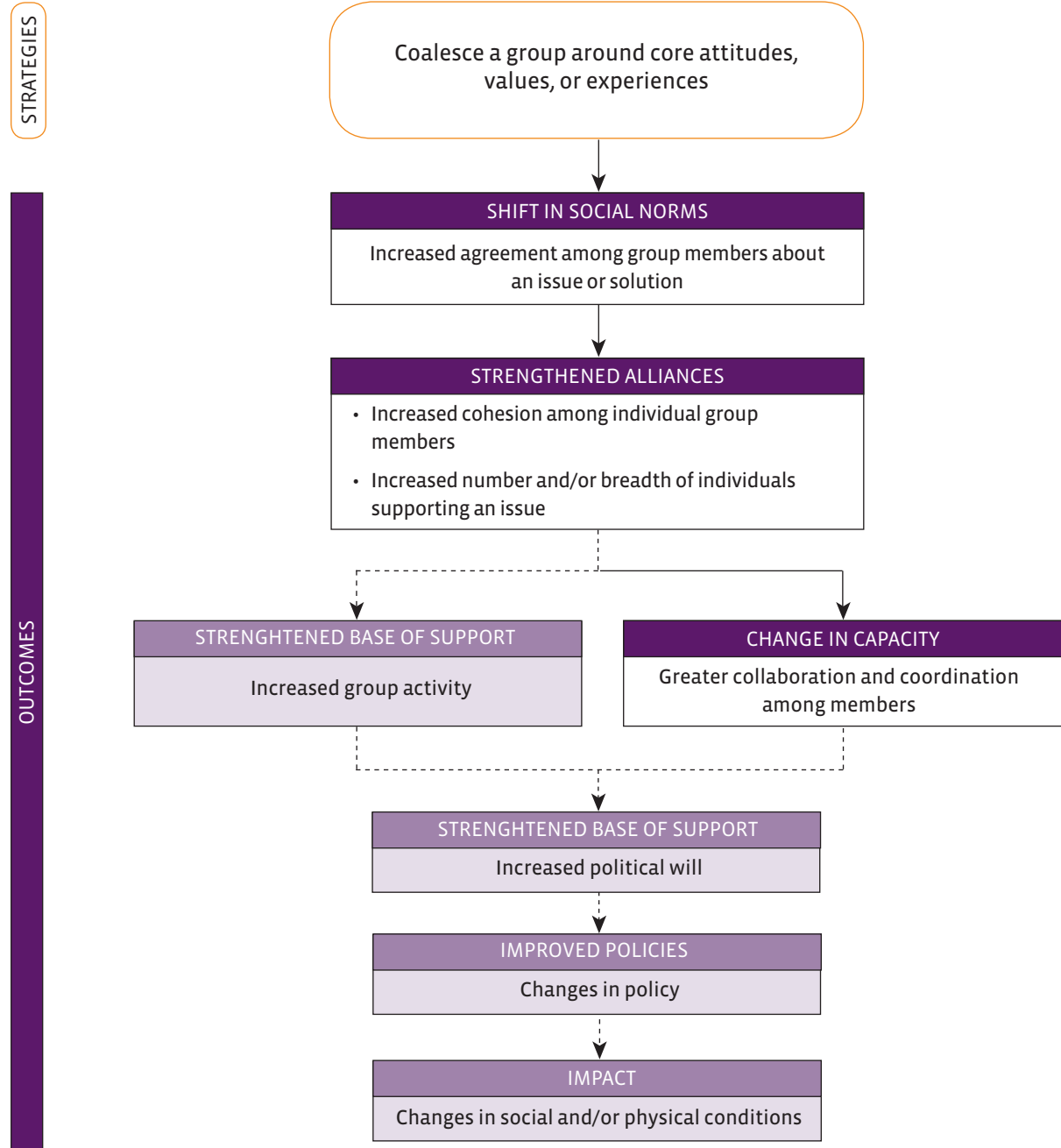
Underlying Assumptions

- Individuals possess multiple concepts of self. It is assumed one can activate (“switch on”) a particular self-concept or identity.
- Members are dependent on their social group or category membership for information.
- Cooperation and cohesion among individuals can stem from the perception of a common category membership.
- Members of a social group or category might exaggerate group norms or compete with each other to enact the group norms as a way of demonstrating that they are closer to the ideal than other group members; this may result in over-conformity or even polarization among members.

Application to Advocacy

- To build coalitions or unlikely allies, advocates may be able to align existing groups or create new groups by finding something around which individuals can identify. Conversely, advocates may tighten group identity by differentiating their group from others.
- To prevent group polarization, an advocacy organization can provide its members with consistent, strictly informational messaging that supports group alignment.
- Promising strategies include:
 - utilizing a network approach to “knit” or “weave” individuals into groups;
 - developing a common agenda that ties to attitudes, values, or experiences of a potential group; or
 - increasing awareness of group principles and messages among members.

“GROUP FORMATION” Theory of Change



⁸ Other sources detailing relevant considerations, tools, and techniques that may be useful companion pieces to this brief can be found in the Advocacy Evaluation Resources, following the Bibliography.

Everett M. Roger’s Diffusion of Innovations, or Diffusion theory, refers to the process by which a change agent (e.g., individual, informal group, or organization) models or communicates an innovation. The innovation can be as diverse as a product, practice, program, policy, or idea. Over time, the innovation may move onward to certain types or categories of adopters: early adopters, the early majority, the late majority, and laggards. Should the innovation reach a critical mass, it either will be adopted or rejected by members of the social system. An innovation is more likely to be adopted if it is relatively easy to comprehend; perceived as better than the idea it supersedes; and/or is compatible with the values, beliefs, and needs of the potential adopters. The degree to which the innovation, or results of the innovation, is visible and communicated to others, can influence the rate of adoption. When new ideas are invented, diffused, and adopted or rejected, social change can occur.

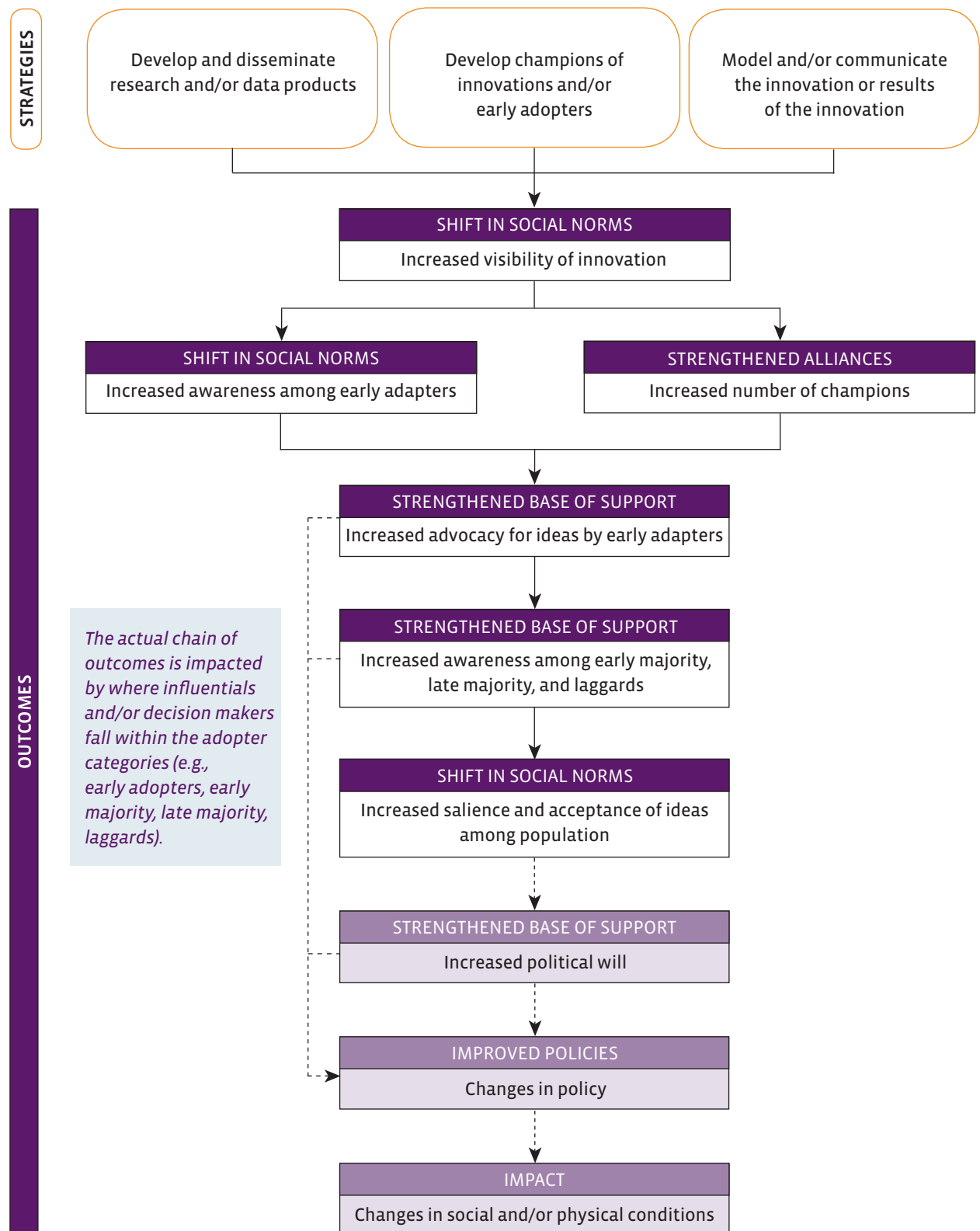
Underlying Assumptions

- Diffusion includes both the planned and spontaneous spread of new ideas.
- Newness means that some degree of uncertainty is involved in diffusion. However, an idea can feel familiar or normative if it is compatible with the potential adopter’s existing values and belief system.
- Potential adopters’ perceptions of the change agent(s) or opinion leader(s) affect their willingness to adopt a new idea. Thus, if the innovator is an outsider to the social system, there may be greater skepticism or opposition to the innovation.
- It should not be assumed that the diffusion and adoption of all innovations is necessarily desirable for a social system.

Application to Advocacy

- Policy and law can force individuals to adopt an innovation. However, individuals seem more open to the innovation or persuadable when the relative advantages of adoption are communicated and/or made visible by peers or media.
- Organizations may appoint a champion or charismatic individual who throws his or her weight behind an innovation and the diffusion process.
- Promising strategies include research, policy solution development, dissemination activities, champion development, and communications.

“DIFFUSION” Theory of Change



Putting Theories into Practice

Talking about theories can feel like an academic exercise. However, knowledge and use of the existing theories highlighted in this brief can further the work of funders and advocates in various ways, including the following:

Shine light on competing and complementary theories: Advocates come from many disciplines (e.g., communications, lobbying, data and research) and different fields of study (e.g., economics, political science, sociology). The interdisciplinary nature of this world often is a strength, but can sometimes lead to lack of alignment as views and assumptions about how the world works collide. Having a framework for recognizing that different theories exist, and being able to identify when they are overarching theories about how policy change happens (e.g., Policy Windows) or theories about particular tactics (e.g., Messaging and Frameworks), can help advocates, partners, and funders have a common language for talking about similarities and differences in approaches and theories of change.

Confirm assumptions: When developing a theory of change, participants in the process draw from a combination of research, personal experience, and “gut” to create their own particular map of their work. By comparing elements from an organization’s or campaign’s theory of change to the relevant theories documented here, advocates, funders, and evaluators can confirm or refine the assumed linkages and outcome paths documented from the group process based on social science research.

Provide fodder for theory of change refinement or enhancement: Considering new or alternate approaches based on the theories outlined in this brief may help advocates, funders, and evaluators “pressure-test” current approaches and assumptions or consider new pathways for change.

Focus activities: Advocates can sometimes suffer from a “kitchen sink” syndrome of doing a little bit of everything and expecting change in all areas. Identifying where a group can have the greatest leverage or which strategies are most promising within a particular theoretical framework can provide some guardrails and guidance for making strategic choices within limited resources.

Clarify alignment across organizations: By clearly articulating their particular worldview or theory guiding their work, funders can select grantees that are more closely aligned with their strategy. Similarly, advocates can make decisions about the degree of overlap between their organization’s work and the funder’s. Advocates also can more effectively partner with other groups by better understanding whether the partnership is jointly pursuing a common approach or if partners are aligning across different but complementary theories of change.

Support identification of evaluative opportunities: As mentioned in the Introduction and well-documented elsewhere,⁷ using theory of change as a tool to clarify the connection between activities and chains of outcomes has become a best practice for evaluating advocacy and policy efforts. Having a strong theory of change helps advocates and evaluators speak a common language and creates a basis for determining what to measure and evaluate. A specific evaluation approach will depend on the audience, the purpose, and the resources available, but evaluators, funders, and advocates can use a theory of change to consider what kinds of outcomes would be reasonable to achieve in what sequence, which outcomes are most important to achieve, and what assumptions should be monitored or assessed when creating a measurement plan or evaluation design.⁸

Provide structure for measurement, but not too much: Many advocates fear that documenting a theory of change will create rigidity and hamper their ability to be nimble and responsive as conditions evolve. However, a theory of change should allow for these kinds of adjustments by capturing the categories or kinds of interim outcomes that are sought. For example, if advocates adjust the degree to which particular advocacy activities within a theory of change are dialed up or down (e.g., grassroots mobilizing, champion development) or how a particular tactic is deployed (e.g., specific message used, partners sought), the same *type* of interim outcomes included in the theory of change should be achieved. While aspects of the work have changed, the same path toward impact is being pursued. Alternately, evaluators, funders, and advocates may find it useful to recognize if an organization is making a wholesale change in strategy and significantly changing their theory of change, as opposed to making changes within a consistent overall direction. In such a case, evaluators should work with advocates to consider the ramifications of a broad change in theory to evaluation efforts.

Conclusion

The 10 theories presented here provide a social science-based grounding in how policy change occurs and what advocacy tactics can achieve. You may have read about one theory and realized it is closely aligned with your own worldview and lived experience; alternatively, another theory may not resonate for you at all. Regardless, understanding underlying assumptions and theories related to different ways of thinking about advocacy and policy work can help organizations more effectively choose strategies, focus evaluation efforts on critical intermediate outcomes, and ultimately be better positioned to achieve desired impact.

⁷ For example, see Organizational Research Services. (2007). *A guide to measuring advocacy and policy*. Prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Seattle, WA. See also: Guthrie, K., Louie, J., David, T., & Crystal-Foster, C. (2005). *The challenge of assessing advocacy: Strategies for a prospective approach to evaluating policy change and advocacy*. Prepared for The California Endowment. Woodland Hills, CA.

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Advocacy Evaluation Resources

Introductions to Advocacy Evaluation

Advocacy and Policy Change Evaluation: A Primer

Organizational Research Services (2010)

This primer details areas of consensus and learning in the field of advocacy evaluation, and it includes a set of data collection methods and tools for building the field.

The Challenge of Assessing Policy and Advocacy Activities: Strategies for a Prospective Evaluation Approach

Blueprint Research and Design, Inc. (2005)

This publication begins with an overview of the advocacy evaluation field and outlines a “prospective evaluation approach,” which (in contrast to a retrospective approach) allows evaluation to become a management and planning tool. The publication then offers steps for developing such an advocacy evaluation.

Advocacy Outcomes and Data Collection

A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy

Organizational Research Services (2007)

This guide puts forth a framework for naming outcomes associated with advocacy and policy as well as directions for evaluation design. It includes a broad range of methodologies, intensities, timeframes, and purposes.

A Handbook of Data Collection Tools: Companion to “A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy”

Organizational Research Services (2007)

Funded by and prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this handbook offers practical advice for capturing and documenting influences and leverage in a Making Connections community. This guide provides clarification, concrete examples, and suggested approaches for documentation of these often-elusive concepts.

A User’s Guide to Advocacy Evaluation Planning

Harvard Family Research Project (2009)

This tool takes users through four basic steps that generate the core elements of an advocacy evaluation plan, including what outcomes will be measured and how.

Unique Methods in Advocacy Evaluation

Julia Coffman and Ehren Reed (2009)

This brief describes four new data collection methods that were developed to respond to advocacy’s unique measurement challenges, specifically bellwether methodology, policy maker ratings, intense period debriefs, and system mapping.

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