



Moving Mindsets:
*A Playbook for
Building Momentum*



The Long and Short of It

Shifting mindsets for social change is a long game, but short-term policy change must be a part of that calculus, as it can make or break the long-term potential of any culture change effort. Here's how we can think about the short and long term in advocacy playbooks.

Mindset shifts are long games that require short-term wins along the way. Mindset shifts both enable and result from changes in behavior, policy, institutions, and structures. That means enduring, sustainable social change requires attention to short-term policy wins while always keeping a steady eye on long-term goals. It's not a question of short-term wins *or* long-term gains; the short term and the long game must be mutually reinforcing.

It's tempting to focus on the short-term policy-change layup—a win is a win—and early victories can certainly help catalyze mindset shifts and policy change. Short-term policy gains without a mindset shift strategy risk backsliding and may not be sustainable. Without a long-term focus, we run the risk of decisive, even dangerous, defeat.

The Playbook

So how do we do this? How do we pursue short-term advances while remaining disciplined and focused on the long-term change goals? It requires orchestration and—above all—commitment to a strategy. Here's the game plan.

Go for the Game-Changers.

When advocating, ask yourself: Would this near-term policy win actually *change lives* in ways that support the mindset that we need to shift to realize our long-term goal? Those are the early wins we want to focus on.

Where we've seen this in play:

The Affordable Care Act (ACA). Passed in 2010, the legislation extended health benefits to over 22 million Americans. The ACA was the difference between life and death for some. Because it made health care available to so many, more people could begin to see the role that government could play in healthcare provision. It set the stage for the idea of Medicare for All as a plausible policy alternative during the Democratic primaries of 2020. This might not have been possible without the passage of the ACA ten years earlier.

Say Something.

Short-term policy wins support mindset shifts when they communicate something that advances our mindset shift strategy. Advocates should consider: What does the policy express? What ideas and narratives does it tap into and advance?

Where we've seen this in play:

Brown v. Board of Education. This 1954 US Supreme Court decision held that segregated schools violated Black students' Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection under the law. The reality of de facto segregation as a lingering civil rights issue today proves how ineffective the law actually was at desegregating schools. But by overturning the legal rationale for America's racial caste system, *Brown* culturally discredited segregation and catalyzed the civil rights movement. Voter registration soared in Black communities after the decision, and support for organizations like the NAACP increased dramatically. One by one, courts began striking down segregation in public libraries, transportation, and other public realms, all citing the *Brown* case. These incremental steps led to pivotal moments in desegregation: the Montgomery bus boycott, the Little Rock Nine, sit-ins in Birmingham, the March on Washington, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The *Brown* ruling was a watershed moment in history of civil rights because of the message this legal decision conveyed to the American people.

Make the Story Stick.

A mindset shift strategy requires a story arc that runs through and ties together each short-term policy win and pulls together others working on the issue. A narrative through line enables campaigns to build on each other over time and generate the momentum required to shift the public discourse and cultural mindsets. Advocates and funders should consider: Does the issue campaign have narrative consistency across activities and over time? What partners need to be mobilized and organized? Policy campaigns include people and groups working on different pieces of strategy; issue campaigners might not be also crafting legislative strategy, while others may be working on grassroots mobilization. Narrative consistency across activities requires a high degree of collaboration since narrative strategies should ideally connect with subsequent campaigns.

Where we've seen this in play:

The Black Lives Matter movement. This movement has had policy wins: police reform, removal of racist relics and monuments, and education reform that advances racial equity, among others. These are changes in different areas of civic life, with a diverse set of actors, but all were achieved under the broader narrative for racial justice and the insistence that society recognizes the value and sanctity of Black lives.

The Recap (and your next play)

Issue advocates need both short- and long-term perspectives. That requires identifying short-term policy wins that change how people live and have potent symbolic power *and* making sure there is a consistent narrative strategy across campaign activities over time.

When people marvel at the way that “marriage equality happened overnight,” they aren’t seeing the whole story. That movement succeeded in accomplishing the lessons in this “playbook,” thanks to coordinated efforts among extremely dedicated people with a range of experiences and expertise, rigorous research, and millions of dollars of funding, among other resources.

Movements need a robust infrastructure. Those in the philanthropic sector, the academy, think tanks and non-governmental organizations should think seriously about their particular role in ensuring that infrastructure is built to sustain the larger movements they are helping advance.

Conclusion

No matter what you advocate for, the imperatives for sustainable mindset shifts are shared: Understand the kind of shift you’re after, balance short-term gains with long-term milestones, and aim to bring both policymakers and the public along with you.

Mindsets are challenging to shift, but they’re worth it. The fight for social change requires persistence but ultimately pays off in transforming lives for good.

About FrameWorks

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To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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