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MFA in Community Arts, Maryland  
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# Use your radical fringe to shift the Overton window



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- Alinsky, Saul. Rules for Radicals: a practical primer for realistic radicals. USA. Vintage Books, 1971.
- Grist, "Occupy Wall Street can shake up a city—but can it create lasting change?," Greg Hanscom, November 18, 2011
- The Oberlin Review, "Wall Street Demonstrators Challenge Centrist Consensus," Will Rubenstein, November 20, 2011

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*Jimmy McMillan, by running for governor of New York in 2010 on the "The Rent is Too Damn High" Party, effectively shifted the Overton window leftwards, thereby making it easier for more moderate candidates to address economic inequality.*

Contributed by [Josh Bolotsky](#)

### In Sum

The Overton window is the limit of what is considered reasonable or acceptable within a range of public policy options. Slide the window of acceptable debate by focusing attention on a position that is more radical than your own.

The various policy options available on a given issue can be roughly plotted on a spectrum of public acceptability, from unthinkable, to fringe, to acceptable, to common sense, to policy. The Overton window, named after Joseph Overton, a staffer for the center-right Mackinac Center for Public Policy, designates the range of points on the spectrum that are considered part of a "sensible" conversation within public opinion and/or traditional mass media.

The most important thing about the Overton window, however, is that it can be shifted to the left or the right, with the once merely "acceptable" becoming "popular" or even imminent policy, and formerly "unthinkable" positions becoming the open position of a partisan base. The challenge for activists and advocates is

to move the window in the direction of their preferred outcomes, so their desired outcome moves closer and closer to “common sense.”

There are two ways to do this: the long, hard way and the short, easy way. The long, hard way is to continue making your actual case persistently and persuasively until your position becomes more politically mainstream, whether it be due to the strength of your rhetoric or a long-term shift in societal values. By contrast, the short, easy way is to amplify and echo the voices of those who take a position a few notches more radical than what you really want.

For example, if what you actually want is a public health care option in the United States, coordinate with and promote those pushing for single-payer, universal health care. If the single-payer approach constitutes the “acceptable left” flank of the discourse, then the public option looks, by comparison, like the conservative option it was once considered back when it was first proposed by Orrin Hatch in 1994.

This is Negotiating 101. Unfortunately, the right has been far ahead of the left in moving the Overton window in their desired direction for a long time. If anything, the left often plays it in the exact wrong way, actively policing and seeking to silence its radicals for fear that strong left positions will serve to discredit moderate left positions. The irony is that the Overton window should actually be easier for progressives to play: if you look at the polling on issue after issue, from education to jobs to foreign policy, the actual majority stances tend to be to the left of the range of policy proposals on offer.

### Potential Pitfalls

Not all radical positions are effective in shifting the Overton window, so don't just reach for any old radical idea. Ideally, the position you promote should carry logical and moral force, and must include some common ground with your own position — it needs to be along the same continuum of belief if it is to be effective. It also must not be so far out of the mainstream that it becomes toxic for anyone vaguely associated with it, or the backlash will in fact push the Window in the opposite of the desired direction.

Josh Bolotsky is an online organizer, blogger, comedic performer/writer and occasional voiceover artist, currently serving as new media director for Agit-Pop Communications and its Other 98% Project. While at Agit-Pop, he has worked on creating and spreading projects that include the RepubliCorp effort for MoveOn, and Target Ain't People, the very first Depeche-Mode-inspired take on the Citizens United decision to break a million views on YouTube. Josh also serves as part of the national volunteer collective that manages Living Liberally, a network of progressive social groups and activist resources in all fifty states. He enjoys vegan chili and writing about himself in the third person. More at JoshBolotsky.com

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# Overton window

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## From Envirowiki

The **Overton window** is a theory proposed by Joseph P. Overton<sup>[1]</sup>, that states that there is a certain limit (or "window") to topics covered in acceptable public debate, but that that window can be pulled one direction or another by views that are more extreme than are normally accepted.

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## 1 Example

For example, if the tobacco industry were interested in muddying the water of the smoking/public health debate such that it would increase their sales, they might want to say that "smoking isn't unhealthy". But in the current climate, such a view would be ridiculed, as it is fairly extreme - and on the edge of the Overton window. Thus it might be in their interest for *someone else*, especially someone with some perceived credibility, to publicly state that not only are cigarettes not bad for you, but that they actually increase the lifespan of the average smoker. Whether this view was accepted or not wouldn't matter, but it would act to push the overton window in one direction, and would make the original view of the tobacco industry seem less extreme, and therefore more palatable.

## 2 Scale

There Overton window concept operates on a scale<sup>[2]</sup>, from least popular to most, ie:

- Taboo
- Radical
- Acceptable
- Agreeable
- Popular
- Standardised in culture (policy, or tradition)

Sometimes policy can come earlier, and drag culture along with it, sometimes mainstream culture drags policy.

## 3 The overton window and climate change

The policies for climate change are currently becoming popular, however, the most popular policy suggestions are much weaker than required for a safe climate. Safe climate policies (1-1.5 degrees, 350ppmv, zero emissions, etc.) are still considered extremely radical, and people won't call for them for fear of being ostracised. According to the Overton window theory, even more radical targets (perhaps a return to pre-industrial levels?) should be called for by some, in order that those calling for safe-climate policies get a better hearing.

## 4 references

1. ↑ <http://www.mackinac.org/article.aspx?ID=7504>
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# Overton Window

From SourceWatch

The **Overton Window** is a tool used to visualize policy positions along the political spectrum. It was invented by Joseph P. Overton, a Mackinac Center for Public Policy scholar and Vice President, in the mid-1990's and has "gained national currency" since 2003.<sup>[1]</sup> In the Center's own description, it is designed to provide a spectrum which visualizes policies acceptable to the public with the various ends of the spectrum representing 'unthinkable' policies and the middle representing a policy that would be widely well received by the public. Any policy which would be deemed acceptable or desirable by the public is "in the window". The concept also holds that legislators can only act within the window out of their duty to constituents. According to the Center, the window is also finite and can be moved. The Center advocates action by think tanks and other non-political figures which would "shift the window", bringing policies that would once be thought of as radical or unthinkable into the realm of possibility, allowing legislators to enact them. Consequently, policies once looked upon acceptable or desirable would move out of favor with the public.<sup>[2]</sup>

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# Overton window

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For the Glenn Beck novel, see *The Overton Window*.

The **Overton window** is a political theory that describes as a narrow "window" the range of ideas the public will accept. On this theory, an idea's political viability depends mainly on whether it falls within that window rather than on politicians' individual preferences. It is named for its originator, Joseph P. Overton (1960-2003),<sup>[1]</sup> a former vice president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. At any given moment, the "window" includes a range of policies considered politically acceptable in the current climate of public opinion, which a politician can recommend without being considered too extreme to gain or keep public office.

## Overview

Overton described a spectrum from "more free" to "less free" with regard to government intervention, oriented vertically on an axis. As the spectrum moves or expands, an idea at a given location may become more or less politically acceptable. His degrees of acceptance<sup>[2]</sup> of public ideas are roughly:

- Unthinkable
- Radical
- Acceptable
- Sensible
- Popular
- Policy

The Overton Window is an approach to identifying which ideas define the domain of acceptability within a democratic republic's possible governmental policies. Proponents of policies outside the window seek to persuade or educate the public in order to move and/or expand the window. Proponents of current policies, or similar ones, within the window seek to convince people that policies outside it should be deemed unacceptable.

After Overton's death, others have examined the concept of adjusting the window by the deliberate promotion of ideas outside of it, or "outer fringe" ideas, with the intention of making less fringe ideas acceptable by comparison.<sup>[3]</sup> The "door-in-the-face" technique of persuasion is similar.

## In media

The novel *Boomsday* applies the Overton window to the subject of Social Security reform in the United States. The technique used was to agitate for "voluntary transitioning," that is, suicide at a certain age in exchange for benefits, as a method of reducing the cost of Social Security. Ultimately, the goal was a more modest form of reducing the burden on younger people for the costs of Social Security.

In 2010, conservative talk show host and columnist Glenn Beck published a novel titled *The Overton Window*.<sup>[4]</sup>

A similar idea was already expressed in 1868 in the novel *Phineas Finn*:

"Many who before regarded legislation on the subject as chimerical, will now fancy that it is only dangerous, or perhaps not more than difficult. And so in time it will come to be looked on as among the things possible, then among the things probable;—and so at last it will be ranged in the list of those few measures which the country requires as being absolutely needed. That is the way in which public opinion is made."

"It is no loss of time," said Phineas, "to have taken the first great step in making it."

"The first great step was taken long ago," said Mr. Monk,—"taken by men who were looked upon as revolutionary demagogues, almost as traitors, because they took it. But it is a great thing to take any step that leads us onwards."

— Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn*

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# Essay:Thanatos Reviews: The Overton Window Part 1

From RationalWiki

(Redirected from Reviews: The Overton Window Part 1)



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*The Arcana is the means by which all is revealed...*

Beyond the beaten path lies the absolute end. It matters not who you are... Death awaits you."

## Thanatos Reviews: The Overton Window Part 1

### The Plot Thus Far

The Overton Window, Glenn Beck's first novel, opens in an undisclosed location, where a man (Eli Churchill) makes his final phone call. Attempting to reach the leader of the Founder's Keepers (according to Neck in the afterword in case you didn't get this while reading) in order to tell them he has proof of where 2.3 trillion and 2 nukes missing from the government are. He also makes time to tell you exactly how much that is and links it to actual news (Beck does that alot in this novel) when he is expectantly killed by an assassin.

The book then heads over to Noah Gardner, son of Arthur Gardner, the most ruthless PR man ever. Noah, on his 28th birthday, decides to settle down and lays eyes on Molly Ross, a temp at the PR firm who is putting up a flier for a Founders Keepers rally that night. Noah instantly falls in love with her and decides to attend despite her politics.

The scene then jumps to a meeting about a leaked government memo that details identifying and detaining the "Patriotic Rebellion". This list includes: Teapartiers, anti-semites, homeschoolers, tax resisters, Christian Identity groups, 9/11 truthers, militia organizations and pro-lifers. Noah is praised for his work in nullifying the problem when his father goes of into a long sermon about how the economy is going to fail and how he can create a new world. Noah is then asked to leave and contact members for the afternoon portion of the meeting.

Noah goes to the Founders Keepers rally when the cab he hailed is pulled over by the military (who are their because both presidential candidates are in New York for a debate). Noah is talked to and told that the Founders Keepers have ties with the Aryan Brotherhood (How did the even know he was going?). Noah throws his father's weight around and leaves without a fight, not helping his middle-eastern cab driver.

Noah arrives at the rally where he sees people of every race and social class, and notes a peaceful atmosphere unlike what he had heard about the rally. Noah finds Molly and decides to show her his special talent: He can tell when someone is lying. He points to one guy at the back and says he is a police. Molly then antagonizes the man without question and he leaves.

Molly then introduces the two speakers who will preach to use for the next little while, Danny Bailey, an internet version of Beck, and Beverly Emerson, The founder of the Founders Keepers and Molly's mother.

After drinking and interrupting Bailey's speech (really, he just finished a quote by Gandhi to himself) Noah decides to reveal that some of their Globalist organizations claims are true, and that he works for them. He then goes on to claim that no one will take them seriously and goes on to list what he could call members to destroy the integrity of the group (This includes Teapartier and Holocaust denier).

Bailey then resumes his urging for a revolution when a man in the audience fires a gun. The police rush in and arrest everyone there, with the media waiting outside. Noah, at the jail, recognizes the problematic members of the crowd joking with the cops. Believing they are undercover cops themselves, really contract security officers(Beck tells us in the afterword that cops and federal agents are always on the side of the good guys). Noah tells this to his lawyer, who throws his father's name round. Some cops come forward to collaborate this story and the Founders Keepers are released. Noah gives Molly and her mother a ride to their homes, talks about how seductive and ruthless Bill Clinton was and links his father's PR firm to Nazis. That takes the reader up to page 106, Chapter 13.

TO BE CONTINUED

## Thoughts thus far

Reading this is something of a headache. The best way I can describe it is that Beck is armed with an Uzi and shooting from the hip. His attacks are rapid and spraying all over the place. He attacks the Fairness Doctrine and the Patriot ACT in the same paragraph. That being said, I am not really sure if Beck knows who he is attacking in this novel. He purposely leaves out the words Republican and Democrat, but we all know who he really is attacking: PROGRESSIVES! I think that Beck is trying to take every gripe a citizen might have and blend them together so that no matter what your problem is, it is the fault of progressives.

Continuing on, Beverly Emerson and Danny Bailey seem to represent two sides to Glenn Beck's rantings. Emerson is this motherly version of Beck. This is Beck when he starts talking about "restoring America". This is Beck when he invokes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. Bailey, on the other hand, is Beck with a baseball bat. When confronting Noah about finishing the quote, he mocks him as a Harvard elite and calls him a supporter of Che. Beck seems to write him more negatively, possibly because he is trying to associate himself with Dr. King.

The Founders Keepers are Beck's ideal party. Hardworking people from every walk of life, Noting Beck's usage of the word Tea Party thus far, I have concluded that Beck has lost faith in people taking the party seriously. He tries to paint documented cases of racism within the Tea Party as staged by anti-Tea Party groups. He doesn't really go into what is wrong with the Tea Party, just that people have too many labels to attack them with.

Now, if that infiltration by police reminds people of certain scenes from Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, there is one difference. Beck states that the cops never side with the bad guys. Quote: "If there is one thing that every group fighting for our rights and freedoms agrees on, it's that those entrusted with the public safety, from local cops to federal agents, are on the side of the good guys." I want to see Beck try to explain the police arrests of the Republican National Convention protesters in 2004.

Noah's interest in Molly seems way to far-fetched to me. The narration starts off saying he has always had luck with the ladies, but he decides to have a serious relationship. He sees Molly and falls head over heels for her. After seeing that she supports the Founders Keepers, instead of trying to really get to know her at work, he decides to follow her. And then when he bails out the Founders Keepers, this was a complete change in Noah, as he had just walked away from the Middle-Eastern cab driver who begged for his help.

The PR firm, and by extension Arthur Gardner, is Beck's evil empire. They create everything from stupid fads such as pet rocks, pop music (in contrast to the Founders Keepers who play country. Glenn Beck attacking John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen again?), tobacco companies, manufacturing reasons to go to war et cetera. I particularly like when Arthur Gardner credits himself for bottled water. He is also credited, on a dare, for all the Che and Mao merchandise. If there is anything about American culture that Beck doesn't like, this firm has had a hand in it...The Iraq war was another firm.

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Those are my thoughts on the first third of the book. Be sure to check out part two, coming soon.

## See Also

- Thanatos Reviews: The Overton Window Part 2

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