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UK politics

Looking through the Overton window

The 'Overton window' has become a commonplace concept in recent political debates. Andrew Stone considers what it suggests about the influence of political parties, pressure groups and think-tanks.

The Overton window (see illustration at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overton_window) was first devised by Joseph Overton (1960–2003), a senior vice-president at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, one of America's largest think-tanks. After Overton's death the concept was developed by his colleague, Joseph Lehman, who named it after him.

What is it?

Overton proposed that the political viability of a policy depends primarily on it falling within what the public perceives to be an acceptable range of options (i.e. within the Overton window), rather than on the principles or preferences of particular politicians. This does not mean that all political discourse is permanently fixed. Lehman argues that the Overton window can be moved or expanded, and that

> 'families, workplaces, friends, media, churches, voluntary associations, think tanks, schools, charities, and many other phenomena that establish and reinforce societal norms are more important to shaping our politics than we typically credit them for.'

Although smuggled in this quotation into a fairly long list of potential agents for change, think-tanks have generally focused on how they can themselves be effective – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that they have birthed and propagated the concept. Josh Treviño, a fellow of the Claremont Institute, argues that:

> 'The mission of a think tank is to introduce ideas into public discourse and normalize them within the public discourse. The steps an idea takes to full legitimacy are roughly as follows:
>
> - unthinkable
> - radical
> - acceptable
> - sensible
> - popular
> - policy

Treviño suggests that the Overton window is a useful way of visualising a political journey that stays

> 'within the bounds of possibility – the acceptable, sensible, and popular – even as it reaches for long-term goals in the radical and unthinkable categories.'

Applying this to the UK

The economy

While the theory originates with American policy analysts, it can equally be applied to UK politics. To take one example, widespread nationalisation of industries first became a mainstream policy option under the government of Clement Attlee. The mobilisation of the economy during the Second World War created a blueprint that many in the electorate believed should be applied to peacetime. The Conservative and Labour governments that followed largely kept in place the 'mixed economy' of private enterprise alongside publicly owned utilities such as energy, transport, banking and water. At that time the political consensus was that such policies were both popular and sensible. However, after the crisis-hit 1970s the Overton window shifted towards a 'popular capitalism' process of privatisation that is only now beginning to abate, with piecemeal renationalisation of the railways. Opinion polls suggest high levels of support for such measures have been growing since 2017, with 76% saying that the railways should be in the public sector.

Were politicians merely responding to changed public opinion, as the Overton window theory tends to suggest, or were they shaping it? While Tony Blair stressed the pragmatic necessity of accepting the dominance of the free market to make the Labour Party electable after four terms in opposition, some measures – such as the immediate independence given to the Bank of England – were not manifesto promises. But after this *fait accompli* the Bank of England now appears immune to renationalisation (with only 30% in favour). Despite its increasingly frequent use recently, the Overton window concept emerged in a substantially different political period – one dominated in the UK by the post-Thatcher consensus of free markets and social liberalism epitomised by Tony Blair and David Cameron. Both stressed a technocratic, 'hands-off' approach to the economy.

This worldview echoed in many ways the fiscal conservatism of the Mackinac Centre (which Overton worked for) and the Claremont Institute (Treviño was also a speechwriter for Republican President George W. Bush, Tony Blair's ally in the Iraq War). There is a political logic in think-tanks that are committed to the minimal role of government in regulating markets, convincing politicians that this is a natural state of affairs. A corollary of this is that mainstream parties claimed to be 'post-ideological', and focused on 'valence issues' of character and effectiveness, rather than 'position issues' that might alienate floating voters.

Populism

The last decade has seen the rise of populist politics, evident in the vote for Brexit in 2016 and the election (and later re-election) of Donald Trump to the White House. Both were led by profoundly establishment figures (such as Eton-educated Boris Johnson and former stockbroker Nigel Farage) but garnered support precisely because they claimed to stand for the common people outside of the elite mainstream (i.e. beyond the Overton window). More recently, the Green Party has surged in both membership and popularity in the polls since its new leader Zack Polanski embraced an 'eco-populism' centred on wealth taxes.

In this more polarised context, the concept of the Overton window has been denounced by Russian state propaganda as 'cultural imperialism' – a method of putting traditional values under attack. Georgian journalist Natalia Antelava argues that the authoritarian right, in which she includes Trump's MAGA movement, see 'shattering the Overton window' as

> ‘a calculated strategy of gradually expanding what society will tolerate, inch by inch, controversy by controversy. The goal is not just to push boundaries, but to exhaust resistance, to make the previously unimaginable seem not just possible, but inevitable.’

Immigration

So how might this analysis apply to UK politics? Immigration is surely a key example. Consistently stated (alongside ‘sovereignty’) as one of the two main motivations for ‘Leave’ voters in the Brexit vote, it has also been a key driver in the electoral fortunes of Reform UK. Nigel Farage has repeatedly asserted that there has been a censorship of anti-immigration sentiments by branding racist such ‘legitimate concerns’. This is hard to square with the omnipresence of the issue in the media, with important misconceptions produced such as the widespread – but false – belief that there are more immigrants living illegally in the UK than legally.

Such views have apparently driven the rapid shift of the Overton window on this issue. Kemi Badenoch, who argued against leaving the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) when part of the Justice Select Committee and when standing for the Conservative leadership, has now embraced this policy and leapfrogged the Reform pledge to deport 600,000 people over 5 years by promising to deport 150,000 per year. In response, Labour Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood has announced a series of radical reforms that minimise asylum-seeker support. While there is clearly substantial public support for such measures, it is debatable whether politicians have truly ‘followed the lead’ of public opinion, or whether their negative framing of the debate, along with failures in other policy areas such as reducing the cost of living, has helped to shape it.

The influence of think-tanks in this area also deserves careful study, particularly in relation to the network of pro-Brexit lobby groups based at 55 Tufton Street. Their previous success in persuading the electorate to leave the EU is, perhaps, another example where the Overton window can be moved if enough money and political access is leveraged.

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