

Advocating to influence people, politics and policies

By Till Bruckner | October 2017

Introduction

Think tanks have a dual mission. They conduct research to gain a deeper understanding of the world around us, but they also engage in advocacy to use their knowledge, understanding and insights to change and improve the world. This means that they occupy a middle ground between universities, which traditionally see their purpose as generating and deepening knowledge as an end in itself, and campaign groups, whose mission is to change the world rather than understand it.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines advocacy as: “*to publicly support or suggest an idea, development, or way of doing something*”. However, advocacy goes far deeper than just pushing a policy idea or blueprint through the legislative process or convincing a decision-maker to take a specific action. Consider, for example, the privatization of many public utilities such as water, electricity or railways. Fifty years ago, it would have been unthinkable in many Western European countries for a government to sell what most people thought of as public assets and critical infrastructure to private, for-profit corporations, let alone to foreign companies. In this context, it would have been futile for any think tank to “*publicly support or suggest*” that the government auction off train lines to the highest bidder. Nobody would have taken the idea seriously.

Libertarians who favoured privatization adopted a different approach. They formed intellectual societies and think tanks, and started developing their ideas in scholarly books, academic publications and conferences.¹ They introduced a new generation of young economics students to these radical ideas, mentored them, and kept them engaged through a loose network of free market enthusiasts after they entered careers in academia, government and politics. Gradually, they started floating the concept of privatization within policy circles, trying to gain acceptance for the idea among political party elites.² To make the idea acceptable to the public, they then had to reframe it, so that discussions in the media would not be about “giving up public ownership” but about “improving service delivery”.

It took decades until the concept of privatization had become known, understood, and accepted by a critical mass of experts, policy-makers and voters. Only then could libertarian think tanks proceed to the next

1. Madsen Pirie, Think Tank

2. Naomi Klein, The Shock Doctrine

stage of advocacy and “*publicly support or suggest*” that the government should auction off train lines to the highest bidder, and even so, actually privatizing the trains involved many more years of advocacy against a backdrop of protracted political and policy battles.

Thus, advocacy always involves shepherding a policy idea closer towards implementation, but it may take many forms in different contexts and at different stages of the policy process.

The shifting advocacy landscape

Every think tank strikes a different balance between research and advocacy. Some think tanks focus more on research, others more on advocacy, but there is a clear shift towards more emphasis on advocacy in many countries. The main reasons for this are increased competition and strong pressure by funders seeking “impact”.

Increased competition. The advocacy landscape has changed profoundly in recent years. Today, there are more think tanks than ever, and a growing number of other groups (from lobbyists over commercial consulting companies to campaigning charities) conduct their own research and use it to aggressively push their own policy prescriptions. The increasing number and volume of voices in the policy arena means that competition for decision-makers’ attention has heated up.³ Of the many voices, only some will be heard, and fewer will be heeded.

Funder pressure. In the 20th century, established think tanks often received large endowments or grants with no strings attached from philanthropic funders. Think tanks were free to use that money as they wished. In the 21st century, as “impact”, “value for money” and “effective altruism” became fashionable buzzwords in international development and philanthropy,⁴ funders began taking a far more active role. They demanded evidence that their generosity actually benefited society, and many had specific ideas about what kinds of changes they would like to see. The shift in funder priorities, away from supporting quality research and towards achieving concrete social and political changes, is driving think tanks to allocate more and more resources towards advocacy.⁵ To demonstrate the kind of impact that funders demand, think tanks must become successful at advocacy, or they may have to shut down as funding dries up.⁶

Think tanks have always engaged in advocacy, but in the 21st century, just doing advocacy is no longer enough. Due to the combination of increased competition and funder pressure, think tanks have to excel at advocacy in order to survive.

At the same time, politicians, senior civil servants, and nonprofit and corporate leaders continue to appreciate good ideas that will help them to further their own agendas: win votes, deliver better public services, improve peoples’ lives, or increase profits. This course will help your think tank to understand their motivations and concerns, communicate your ideas so that they will take them on board, and shepherd your big policy idea(s) towards implementation.

3. Dan Drezner, The Ideas Industry

4. William Macaskill, Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference. Peter Frumkin. Strategic Giving: The Art and Science of Philanthropy
5. <http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-do-not-think-tank/article/2009599>

6. Donald Abelson, Northern Lights

How does change happen? Three theories

Advocacy revolves around change – usually about promoting it, but sometimes also about preventing it. But how does change happen? The answer to that question will strongly influence how you conduct your advocacy. Theories of change fall into four groups.⁷

THEORY 1: ELITE POWER

The core hypothesis of elite power theory is that the world is ruled and run by powerful individuals. Change happens if and when the relevant powerful individuals decide to make that change. Elite power does not necessarily mean that there is a hidden conspiracy of the rich and powerful, or that different members of the elite always share identical interests. Rather, it means that any given decision is made by only a few people. These individuals alone are able to flick the switch and change the course of events.

If you really want to change something, the theory suggests, you should first identify who exactly has the power to make the changes you want, understand how they see the world and learn what drives their behaviour, seek to build a close relationship with them, and then focus all your time and resources on shepherding them towards your goal.

Advantages. Advocacy efforts based on elite power theory have a laser-like focus on influencing a very small number of people. In some cases, a think tank may limit its advocacy to face-to-face meetings with key decision-makers. Even if a think tank uses the media, all efforts are geared towards influencing only a handful of individuals. As the co-founder of a London think tank wrote, “[W]e were broadcasting our material to millions in order to reach a few hundred.” Having such a clearly defined and narrow target audience can help to keep all advocacy efforts aligned, focused, and consistent. Furthermore, having a clear understanding of who does not matter helps to avoid wasting efforts on activities targeting irrelevant audiences.

Disadvantages. Many different actors compete for the attention of top decision-makers, and a think tank may not be able to deliver its message to them, let alone exert influence. Also, the theory is overly simplistic in that even powerful individuals are constrained in their actions, for example by the need to maintain key (formal and informal) relationships, due process, bureaucratic resistance,⁸ and limited capacity for implementation. Also, targeting individuals rather than institutions means that advocacy efforts can completely fail when those people lose their position of power.

THEORY 2: COALITION POLITICS

The core assumption of this theory is that the status quo in a policy area is maintained by broad coalitions of groups with shared interests. These groups are usually a mix of political, economic, bureaucratic, and social actors and interest groups. An example may be foreign aid given by the United States, which is supported by segments of the Democratic Party,

7. The four groups are distilled from the ten individual theories discussed in “Pathways For Change: 10 Theories to Inform Advocacy and Policy Change Efforts”. A rival framework with similar features is proposed in a classic book by Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision*.

8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yes_Minister

agribusiness (because it subsidizes exports of American food), the State Department and USAID, development NGOs, and many social justice movements.

The theory suggests that policy changes when coalitions change. There are three possible mechanisms. First, the individual members of a coalition may lose consensus on whether to maintain a certain policy, opening the door to policy changes. The second is when the membership of a coalition changes, weakening the coalition's consensus on, or power over, a policy area. Third, a rival coalition may gain control, displacing the old coalition. Advocates should thus focus on changing the alignment of individual coalition members, or on strengthening – and maybe even joining – rival coalitions that support the desired policy options.

Advantages. Advocacy efforts drawing on this theory are able to develop broad strategies that can easily be broken down into different tactical approaches tailored at different coalition members. For example, think tanks can segment their audiences and then engage companies by telling them how their policy would increase their profits, while convincing citizens' groups that it would increase the quality of public services, all without losing sight of the overall goal. A coalition approach also plays to a natural strength of think tanks: their convening power. Think tanks arguably have a unique mandate to bring together very diverse sets of players to talk about a single issue of interest to all of them, and can use this ability position themselves at the centre of debates.

Disadvantages. Coalitions consist of many individual members, multiplying the targets for advocacy. Many think tanks do not have the capacity to engage with so many actors, get to understand their interests, establish and maintain connections, and continually shepherd them towards the desired outcome in a coordinated fashion. Also, engaging different types of coalition partners requires sending out different messages, which can lead to confusion internally and externally about what a think tank actually stands for.

THEORY 3: SOCIAL VALUES AND BELIEFS

This theory is based on the observation that politics and policy are always embedded in a social context, which in turn is shaped strongly by popular values and beliefs. This means that what ordinary people think and feel is extremely important; indeed, in the long run, it may be the only thing that really matters. The theory is at heart of the work of many social advocacy groups, who focus on grassroots activism, changing education curricula, and generating media coverage aimed at the general public.

Thus, policies change not because individuals decide to change them, but because social values and beliefs have changed. No decision-maker can afford to swim for long against the popular tides; even the most powerful players are subject to the broader forces of history and need to take into account popular sentiment at home and abroad.

Advantages. The key advantage of using this framework is that when advocacy succeeds in 'changing hearts and minds' across broad sections of the population, policies that run contrary to social mores inevitably become untenable and new policies take their place. Such changes can become nearly irreversible, irrespective of who happens to be in power and what their interests are. While policy battles will continue, they will be limited to discussions about how a goal should be achieved, not about the goal itself. For example, most European countries only gave the vote

to women after decades of furious debates, but less than a century later, everyone takes it for granted that women participate in elections across Europe.

Disadvantages. Social change is gradual and slow. This makes it virtually impossible to measure or document any impact within a project life cycle, leaving the question of whether you are making any positive difference at all unanswered. Also, advocacy efforts can easily become spread out very thin over a huge audience; if you try and target “everyone”, you may end up reaching nobody. Finally, think tanks often lack grassroots connections, and their staff may not be good at communicating with the general public, because their skills revolve around developing the details of policy rather than painting the big picture in easily comprehensible and emotionally resonant terms.

What comes next?

The course will continue with two 90-minute webinars and a personal task. The webinars will be as interactive as possible, enabling participants to ask questions and share their insights.

- **First webinar: October 11th at 15:00 GMT**
The first webinar will move from theory to practice. It will revisit the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to advocacy, provide guidance on advocacy aims, introduce the basic elements of an advocacy strategy, and give participants an introduction to planning and budgeting for advocacy campaigns, including planning and budgeting for research support.
- **Second webinar: October 25th at 15:00 GMT**
Moving from the general to the specific, the second webinar will focus on implementing advocacy strategies in practice. It will cover insider versus outsider approaches, defining and mapping stakeholders, identifying policy windows, developing actionable policy recommendations, commonly used tools, and look at advocacy efforts from a decision-maker perspective.
- **Personal task: October 25th to November 1st**
The personal task will give all participants the opportunity to develop an integrated research-and-advocacy project including a timeline, and gain feedback on their project design. Utilizing the concepts and tools introduced during the course, the project design should involve putting into practice concepts and approaches covered during the course, including:
 - Setting advocacy aim(s)
 - Defining and mapping stakeholders
 - Deciding whether to follow an insider approach or apply external pressure
 - Convincing decision-makers that they should listen to you
 - Developing actionable policy recommendations
 - Identifying specific decision points

Tasks to complete before the first webinar

The trainer of this course is committed to making the course as relevant as possible to participants’ practical day-to-day work. Therefore,

participants are required to email the trainer (tillbruckner@gmail.com) by October 9th answering the following question in a single paragraph:

“What is the main issue that your think tank expects to advocate on during the coming year, and what change do you hope to achieve regarding that issue?”

(Please consult with others working at your think tank before answering this question.)

Also, in preparation for the course, all participants are required to read the following three short articles. This should take no longer than 30 minutes.

- Seven lessons on policy advocacy from the Adam Smith Institute
- Ten common advocacy campaign mistakes and how to avoid making them
- Learning while doing: a 12-step program for policy change