ASSESSING ADVOCACY INVESTMENTS: APPROACHES FOR GRANT MAKERS AND GRANTEES

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When the Western Energy Project, an initiative of the New Venture Fund, took leadership of a coalition to limit oil shale leasing in the Western US, it wanted to be able to adapt its efforts and track its progress as circumstances changed. The campaign had only a few months to succeed and its funders were nervous. It knew it could not miss a beat.

Advocacy is by nature a risky business with no guarantee of success. Projects may play out over a matter of years in a complex and chaotic political process with many competing interests. For the Western Energy Project (WEP), the central question was not whether the cause of protecting two and a half million acres of public land was worthwhile but whether it could actually make a difference in the time allotted by quickly moving regulatory processes.

Assessing the potential of advocacy always is a daunting task. Some influential observers suggest that systematic methods are mostly useless in gauging the potential of policy campaigns. However, evidence is growing that foundations can make important strides in assessing advocacy projects by evaluating them against a framework of factors crucial to success. While foundations themselves are restricted from engaging in certain types of advocacy projects (i.e., "attempting to influence legislation"), the case studies in this paper describe work conducted by section 501(c)(3) public charities that are permitted to engage in multiple forms of advocacy, including attempts to influence legislation.[1]

WEP, the Hewlett Foundation, and several other influential organizations have joined Redstone in testing a new mechanism for planning, monitoring, and evaluating advocacy investments. The resulting tool provides a methodical and organized approach to managing some of philanthropy's most complicated endeavors. The framework compares possible projects on nine conditions, from the presence of effective champions to favorable timing. It complements and enhances expert judgment when comparing and choosing investments.

Strengthening intuition

Much has been written about the application of intuitive approaches to assessing the potential of advocacy investments. Most recently, Steven Teles and Mark Schmitt suggested that policymaking is typically so chaotic that most methods to assess advocacy projects either before or during the process are worthless.[2] They maintained that it is better to assess advocates rather than advocacy, and that selecting effective advocates yields better results than attempting to determine if a particular campaign offers an attractive return on investment.

[1] Although funders, such as the Hewlett Foundation, may have strategies that include certain legislative milestones, foundations must take care to not lobby or earmark their funds for prohibited lobbying activities. The Hewlett Foundation's funding for this type of policy work is limited to permissible forms of support only, such as project support grants to fund the non-lobbying portions of advocacy projects or to fund activities falling under an exception to lobbying (e.g., nonpartisan analysis and research).

[2] Teles, Steven & Schmitt, Mark (2011). The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer.

There is no question that effective advocacy can be disorganized and confusing, relying on many decisions that cannot be anticipated and requiring highly flexible assessment tools. It also is clear that savvy and skilled advocates are extremely important. Yet we have found that it is possible to assess and monitor most advocacy investments using more than bets on the unstructured intuition of prospective grantees and program officers.

Indeed, the nature of advocacy and the life experiences of a dedicated advocate can conspire to limit the reliability of unaided intuitive judgments. We are all beset by subconscious biases, and it takes a special type of expertise to overcome them. The Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman has devoted his career to studying expert intuition. He found that experts develop reliable intuition when they operate in environments that are "sufficiently regular to be predictable" and have the "opportunity to learn those regularities through prolonged practice" – think chess players[3].

But we know advocacy work to be highly unpredictable and unfold over years. The advocates closest to the issue will develop unparalleled expertise on the policies, legislative allies, and communications tactics likely to be effective. However, that expertise may not lead to an intuitive sense of when advocacy is more or less likely to be successful.

When it comes to advocacy, even the most experienced advocates and wisest decision-makers need help overcoming their subconscious biases. Take the phenomenon of "anchoring", for example. An expert who has just won a hard-fought legislative victory thanks to an inspired public information campaign may anchor on that experience, consistently over-emphasizing the importance of public communications when evaluating future opportunities. In general, biases drive us to pay more attention to what is most recent, most emotionally salient, and most familiar.

A bit of structure can go a long way toward overcoming these biases and fairly evaluating an advocacy campaign's chances. As Kahneman observes, "Simple, equally weighted formulas based on existing statistics or on common sense are often very good predictors of significant outcomes."[4] The tool for assessing advocacy investments discussed in this paper provides grant makers and grantees a flexible methodology to reduce bias and strengthen intuitive judgments about success and failure without assuming a particular path to success.

A promising tool

Although this structured approach to evaluating advocacy campaigns is new, it draws on the experience of both practitioners and leading thinkers. Redstone reviewed a dozen models to determine the common themes in advocacy assessment. Many of them are summarized in Catherine Crystal Foster's paper "Frameworks and Tools for Selecting and Reporting on Interim Policy Outcomes."[5] They range from John Kingdon's well-known 1995 work to a

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[3] Kahneman, Daniel (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. p. 236.

[4] Ibid, p. 226.

[5] Foster, Catherine Crystal (2011). *Frameworks and Tools for Selecting and Reporting on Interim Policy Outcomes.* Internal report for the Hewlett Foundation.

framework from the Urban Institute and work by Kristi Kimball of the Hewlett Foundation in collaboration with Capitol Impact consultants. Out of the research emerged nine crucial conditions for successful advocacy.

The framework's principles helped the WEP estimate the likelihood of success for the oil shale campaign. They have been useful in assessing the achievements of Hewlett Foundation projects to conserve the Wyoming Range, to spur clean electricity, and to improve California education data systems. The Center for Global Development (CGD) also has adopted elements of the framework to assess prospective research projects focused on advocacy. In all of these initiatives, the conditions built into the framework have helped funders and grantees make important decisions about which projects to support and what mid-course corrections to make in response to shifting political winds.

The tool is designed for advocacy campaigns that are pursuing the adoption of a specific legislative, regulatory, or legal change. While the tool can be useful when evaluating efforts to formulate new solutions and implement policies already adopted, a different balance of conditions – expanding some, collapsing others – is more effective in those cases[6].

To evaluate advocacy aimed at policy adoption, the tool begins by identifying the goal and proposed policy solution of the particular campaign at hand. Next, the tool helps funders analyze nine conditions widely viewed by leading researchers as essential to a successful policy campaign. These conditions have evolved during the development of the tool:

1. **Functioning venue(s) for adoption:** The relevant legislative, legal, and regulatory institutions are functioning sufficiently for advocacy to be effective.
2. **Open policy window:** External events or trends spur demand for the solution.
3. **Feasible solution:** A feasible solution has been developed and shown to produce the intended benefits.
4. **Dynamic master plan:** A pragmatic and flexible advocacy strategy and communications plan is ready for execution.
5. **Strong campaign lead(s):** Central advocates can assemble and lead the resources to execute the strategy and communications plan.
6. **Influential support coalition:** Allies who can sway needed decision-makers and help the campaign lead to pursue the solution.
7. **Mobilized public:** Relevant public audiences actively support the solution and its underlying social principles.
8. **Powerful inside champions:** Decision-makers who can overcome the opposition support the solution and its underlying principles.

[6] The tool used by the Center for Global Development (CGD) focused on the formulation of new policy solutions, and so expanded the feasible solution condition to better analyze how CGD hoped to contribute. A variation to evaluate efforts to improve implementation has not been tested, but could expand the analysis of the clear implementation path condition.

9. **Clear implementation path:** The implementing institution has the commitment and the capacity to execute the solution.

These conditions can be used three ways, each increasing in complexity and offering decision-makers additional information to aid their deliberations: 1) as a checklist, 2) as a rubric, and, 3) as a quantitative estimator.

Used as a checklist, the tool helps grant makers consider the full range of influential factors, not only those most relevant in recent experiences or prominent in the news. Used as a rubric, the tool helps them avoid biases when evaluating conditions, and can provide a foundation for collaborative evaluation and decision-making. Finally, when used as a quantitative estimator for likelihood of success, the tool can help funders judge likely returns on investments.

Quantitative likelihood of success estimates build on the checklist of conditions and the rubric to assess them. Each condition is assessed using the rubric as a guide. The resulting scores are plugged into a flexible formula that provides systematic and replicable estimates of likelihood of success. Six of the conditions (conditions 3-8) are related to the campaign ("campaign conditions") and can be improved by advocates in the near-term. These conditions are given one-to-five scores and the scores are averaged together using appropriate weightings (most often equal). Since weak points are quickly identified, grant makers know early in the process where changes in investments might improve likelihood of success.

Conditions 1, 2, and 9, on the other hand, describe the context of the campaign ("context conditions"). These can dampen or amplify advocacy but are generally outside of advocates' control, especially in the near-term. In a challenging context – whether due to gridlocked institutions, lack of attention by decision makers, or faulty implementation – even the most successful advocacy campaign is unlikely to produce a win with the intended social benefits. Yet when a policy window opens in a strong institutional environment, the momentum can carry even mediocre campaigns to significant wins. The context conditions are also given one-to-five scores, and their average sets the bounds for a campaign's effectiveness[7].

Used in this way, the tool helps program officers and grantees translate their knowledge into consistent quantitative estimates that form the basis for discussion and modification. The quantitative estimates are not final answers. Rather, they serve as starting points that synthesize many pieces of information – both publicly available and provided informally by experts – and identify strengths and weaknesses that can be used to set strategy, monitor progress, and assess results. As a result, the tool can be used when:

- **Evaluating pathways** to advocacy success, helping funders and grantees pick a strategy that complements the context and collaborators' investments.
- **Incorporating contribution** when evaluating pathways, identifying opportunities that deliver the most bang for the buck.
- **Monitoring progress** to respond nimbly to events that require a change in strategy.

[7] Specifically, the weighted average of the context conditions is used to set the bounds for likelihood of success, and the campaign conditions are used to estimate the point within that range. Multiple methods have been used to achieve this effect.

- **Assessing results** to test assumptions and learn about how campaigns were truly effective in educating policy-makers and the public.

Evaluating pathways

Choosing among all the possible campaign pathways to advance a program's goal is one of the most important steps toward creating a well-developed strategy. Several paths may lead to the same result and each may have different strengths and weaknesses. For example, if a program's goal is recovery of an endangered fish species, it could pursue water rights litigation under the Endangered Species Act, regulations to modify the operation of dams, or legislation that appropriates more funding to recovery. Each route may differ in context (conditions 1, 2, and 9), and in the political realities, like the inside champions and support coalition. By using this tool to periodically scan and reassess the potential paths and attendant tradeoffs, advocates can design a campaign with the highest likelihood of success even as the political landscape shifts.

That sort of pathway assessment proved extremely helpful to the Hewlett Foundation when it selected the top five states where it would give support for broad-based advocacy of clean electricity policies, rallying voices beyond the environmental NGO community. The aim was to provide advocacy support in influential states with high potential for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. One of the requirements was that the states were likely to be home to important decision makers in deliberations on the Clean Air Act (Figure 1).

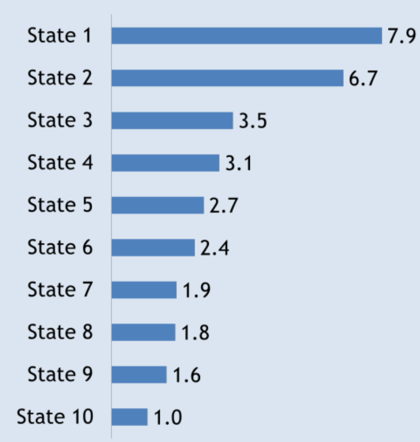
The tool may be used to evaluate pathways:

- **As a checklist.** Scan the pathways to see which offers more of the nine conditions, and flesh out a few top alternatives.
- **As a rubric.** Assess each of the top alternatives along the nine conditions, reprioritizing based on highest average score if necessary.
- **As a quantitative estimator.** Estimate likelihood of success for each of the top alternatives, again reprioritizing if necessary. Test the sensitivity of the relative likelihoods of success to the conditions most liable to change over the course of the campaign.

Figure 1

Expected return on investment for 10 states

Expected normalized benefit per $M



Incorporating contribution when evaluating pathways

Determining the likelihood of success of a pathway is only the first step toward evaluating it. The framework also can be employed to estimate expected contribution to that success. Both factors contribute to the calculation of estimated return on investment, which may be an important factor in a funder's deliberations

For example, one state became a top choice for broad-based support when Hewlett analyzed the prospects of advocacy for clean electricity in 10 states and one region. Based on interviews with experts in the field, the likelihood of increasing the top state's renewable energy requirement was calculated at about 90 percent with Hewlett grants for educating and building broad based support for clean energy. The contribution made by engaging broad-based groups was estimated at 50 percent.[8] That meant that the Foundation's dollars would have a large impact on the state's policies.

Similarly, efforts to inform the state's public utility commission and city council deliberations on rules governing a utility's energy mix were given likelihoods of success of about 70 percent with Hewlett's support. The contribution was forecast at 25 percent. Those figures helped give this state the highest expected return on investment among the candidates and pushed it to the top of the list.

Only by strengthening relatively weak conditions can a grantee make the difference in the outcome of a project. If a grantee is working on improving conditions that are already strong, there is little change in the resulting likelihood of success and estimated contribution is much lower.

The tool may be used to incorporate contribution:

- **As a checklist.** Compare current conditions for each pathway to the goals of the advocacy campaign and prioritize opportunities to deliver missing conditions.
- **As a rubric.** Rate each of the nine conditions twice for each pathway. First, rate the conditions as they would be without the proposed campaign. Then rate them based on what the campaign is expected to deliver. Prioritize opportunities where the change is greatest, all else being equal.
- **As a quantitative estimator.** Estimate likelihood of success for both sets of rubric ratings. Use differences in the results to estimate contribution and expected return; prioritize the opportunities that offer the highest returns.

[8] The Foundation did not provide support to influence the qualification or passage of any ballot question, including engaging in express advocacy communications. Foundation support was limited to educational work on the health impacts and economic benefits of clean air and renewable energy.

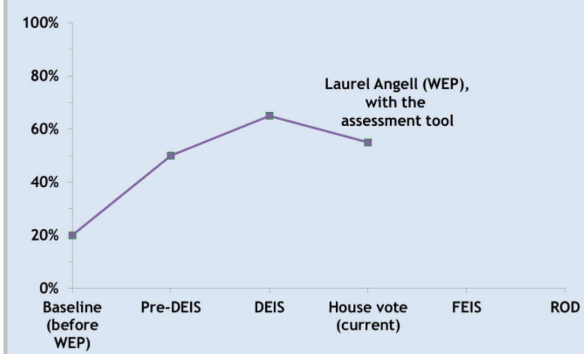
Monitoring progress

The policy environment often shifts as a strategy moves forward. Politicians leave office, the economy takes a sudden plunge, or new issues capture the public imagination. Advocates must be ready to respond quickly, which requires closely monitoring the progress of an initiative. This structured approach provides a formal process for tracking a strategy and allows grant makers to monitor the trajectory of different investment opportunities, realigning their funding as necessary.

Returning to an earlier example, WEP is drawing on the tool to estimate its likelihood of success through several stages of its efforts to restrict oil shale leasing up to release of the Final Environmental Impact Statements and a Record of Decision (ROD).

One of the purposes of using the tool is to monitor WEP's contribution to the effort over time. The tool was employed to look back at the project's likelihood of success before WEP became involved and to forecast results now that it has entered the fray. The calculations showed the likelihood of success jumping from approximately one-in-five to approximately one-in-two with WEP's involvement (Figure 2). This was important because it meant WEP was delivering resources where needed and not just duplicating others' efforts.

Figure 2
Oil shale leasing likelihood of success estimates



To tool may be used to monitor progress:

- **As a checklist.** Track the nine conditions over time with a "traffic light" dashboard. If conditions deteriorate unexpectedly or are not improving as expected, consider a change in strategy.
- **As a rubric.** When crucial events occur, reassess the nine conditions against the rubric. If assessments change dramatically – for the better or worse – consider a change in strategy to eliminate duplicated effort or missed opportunity.
- **As a quantitative estimator.** When critical events occur, re-estimate likelihood of success and contribution, and revise estimates of return on investment. Consider reallocating the portfolio or redesigning campaign strategies to improve returns.

Assessing results

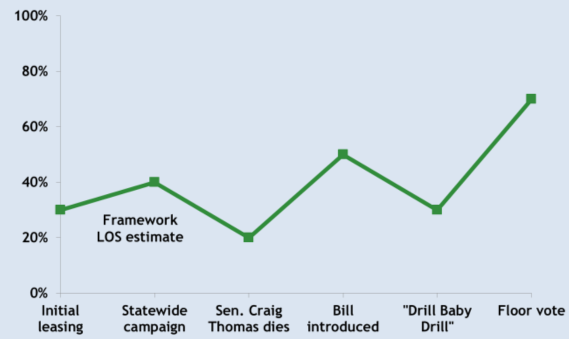
The lessons from past projects can prove invaluable in choosing new investments. An assessment of an effort to protect land in the Wyoming Range from oil and gas drilling suggests that continued NGO support was essential to securing the final outcome, despite large variations in the likelihood of success. All parties ultimately regard the 2009 Wyoming

Range Legacy Act, which protected 1.2 million acres of remote Wyoming mountains from further oil and gas exploration, as a tremendous victory for conservation.

The work began in 2005 when the US Forest Service offered up 44,000 acres of oil and gas leases in the Wyoming Range. A broad coalition of conservationists, sportsmen, unions, outfitters, and landowners was put together – spearheaded by Trout Unlimited and The Wilderness Society. The campaign gained momentum, but saw two significant events that reduced its likelihood of success: first, its prime inside champion, Senator Thomas, died in 2007; and second, an era of high gas prices led to more public support for drilling. The campaign overcame these obstacles by finding a new inside champion to introduce the bill (the new Senator John Barrasso with support and pressure from Senator Thomas's widow and Governor Dave Freudenthal) and a strong campaign with the broad support coalition that led to a floor vote and passage of the bill in 2009 (see Figure 3 for likelihood of success estimates over the various stages).

Figure 3

WY Range likelihood of success estimates



This example shows that the continued NGO support was crucial to secure the final outcomes (their contribution was high, estimated around 60 percent), and also that the likelihood of success of a given campaign can be expected to vary over time. Decisions on continued investment should weigh potential changes in the political landscape or likelihood of success conditions. In this case, continued investment in the face of varying estimates of likelihood of success led to a very successful overall outcome.

The tool may be used to assess results:

- **As a checklist.** Evaluate the campaign's final outcome and compare it with the initial expectations about which conditions would persist. Assess what the campaign could have done differently to respond to changing conditions.
- **As a rubric.** Review campaign activities against changes in the conditions over time. Identify the activities that seemed to improve conditions – accounting for the work of other actors and external events – and those that were less cost effective.
- **As a quantitative estimator.** Compare likelihood of success estimates over time and across campaigns to improve the way estimates are made, especially the relative weights on the conditions. If outcomes consistently belie estimates, review how those estimates were made to improve accuracy in the future.

Conclusion

Savvy grant makers know that advocating for policy change is often the most productive path when the issue is as monumental and complex as global warming, the country's education system, or large-scale ecosystem protection. But philanthropic advocacy is also an extremely difficult and chaotic process fraught with risk. Absent explicit efforts to assess that risk, it may take many expensive years to determine whether advocacy campaigns are likely to succeed.

The assessment tool described here offers grant makers a clear-eyed, analytical method to assess whether their efforts to solve big problems will make a real difference. It shows promise in bolstering the intuition of prospective grantees and other experts as funders synthesize information to compare campaigns, estimate the expected return of an investment, and predict an organization's potential contribution to success. The early applications described in this paper suggest that it can help grant makers determine whether they are choosing the right topics and investing in the right grantees to reach their goals.

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Redstone provides individualized assistance to philanthropies and non-profits interested in making the most of their advocacy investments. Redstone has adapted the tool described in this paper for institutions working on a wide variety of social issues and at every phase of the policy design, advocacy, and implementation process. There are detailed rubrics for each of the nine conditions that can be coupled with customized metrics to yield an integrated approach to strategy, monitoring, and evaluation. An online version of the tool will soon be available to aid data collection and real-time analysis and review. More about Redstone and the results we have delivered by providing strategy and analysis to solve urgent social issues can be found at: www.redstonestrategy.com.