



Betting on the Tortoise: Policy Incrementalism and How Philanthropy's Support Can Turn Small Sustained Steps into Big Impact

By William Foster, Marc Solomon, Eric Chen, and Zach Slobig

Big public policy wins in the United States capture the popular imagination, animate public discourse, and change society in important ways. Think of the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act, the landmark 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Affordable Care Act of 2010. Or of the Supreme Court’s decisions on affirmative action and *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. Bruen*.

For many—engaged citizens, activists, and donors across ideological perspectives—the scale and urgency of injustices focus attention and action on these major, nationwide moments. However, these monumental turning points are most often the accrual of decades of deliberate small steps by thoughtful and strategic advocates on the road to the big win. In the wake of the Supreme Court ruling that brought an end to state bans on marriage for same-sex couples, President Barack Obama offered a memorable reflection on the power of persistent incrementalism. “Sometimes there are days like this,” he said from the Rose Garden, “when that slow, steady effort is rewarded with justice that arrives like a thunderbolt.”

In fact, that proverbial thunderbolt was the result of 88 smaller policy victories, at least 23 major setbacks, and 22 years of disciplined work in the making, including 12 years of work by an intermediary organization purpose-built to push the policy across the finish line. Marriage for same-sex couples was legal in 37 states and the District of Columbia before it became the law of the land nationwide.¹

Incremental: that’s most often how effective national policy change works. In fact, look closely at many social movements and you can see how localized, successive, incremental wins have shaped broad, national policy. At the state level, those victories may even be quite radical when compared to what could be accomplished on the federal level. They appear less and less radical over the lifespan of a movement.

When we analyzed 10 major, national policy advances in the United States over the past century—progressive to conservative—we found that time and again those “big wins” accrued from a strategic, sustained approach. Two steps forward, one step back, over a long haul. On average, those big policy victories came from at least 40 smaller wins over the course of about 25 years of structured work. (See [Figure 1](#) on page 5.) Like the proverbial tortoise, slow and steady wins the race, even when the result may arrive as an explosive, system-shaking thunderbolt.

It’s no surprise that the idea of incrementalism often fails to stir the soul. Imagine a call-and-response chant from activists marching in the street, their unified voices bouncing off surrounding buildings: “What do we want!?! *Change!* When do we want it!?! *Over a generation, little by little!*” Would you join that march? A push for incrementalism can be jarring. In a climate of stark political polarization and social media-fueled tribalism, where urgent action seems to be both the rational and natural impulse, incrementalism can appear badly out of step with the dominant narrative. But Tim Gill, a strategic and

visionary funder of the marriage equality movement, says stacking up smaller wins delivers on that urge for immediate change. “Every increment of justice makes someone’s life better and it makes it better now,” he says, “not in some utopian future.”

When the policy issues of the day appear so amorphous, expansive, and hot button, both civil society and philanthropy too often disengage.

Yet opportunity abounds for steady, sustained philanthropic investment to fuel incremental achievement that builds the broad societal support needed to achieve landmark victories. “Experience indicates that small changes, compounded over time, can add up to something significant,” write Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox, both longtime criminal justice reform policy practitioners, in the recently published [Gradual: The Case for Incremental Change in a Radical Age](#). “Unfortunately, incrementalism has become unfashionable at the precise moment when we need it most.”

In this article, we hope to help bring policy incrementalism back into fashion, particularly for philanthropists who seek social change. The article relies on our own experience with social movements, along with insights from more than 20 interviews of movement leaders, advocates, philanthropists, and intermediary organizations. It took inspiration from the seminal 1959 essay “[The Science of ‘Muddling Through’](#)” in which political scientist and economist Charles Lindblom mused about how incremental changes allow policy makers to hone their policies over time. And it builds on the 2018 article “[When Philanthropy Meets Advocacy](#),” co-authored by Civitas’s Patrick Guerriero and The Bridgespan Group’s Susan Wolf Ditzkoff, which addressed philanthropic challenges to engagement in advocacy.

It will describe an approach to policy change that differs sharply from the default mindsets of many funders. It will highlight the often quiet, always persistent work of advocates whose efforts have strategically reshaped the policy landscape of our country over the past century. We’ll also point to the barriers—and inroads—to broader funder engagement in this work. We will explore the anatomy of several successful policy movements, share new data on policy advances in the United States, and show how purpose-built intermediaries can be crucial drivers of that steady effort on the road to a major, national policy win. We’ll also offer a look at the current landscape of opportunity for funders to engage in this pathway toward systemic social change.

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TIM GILL, PHILANTHROPIST AND
LGBTQ+ ACTIVIST

Why Few Funders Engage in Policy Change

“What I want to do is turn a million dollars of giving into a billion dollars of social change,” says Nick Hanauer, venture capitalist and founder of [Civic Ventures](#). “I’m always looking for that leverage. Changing laws, norms, and policy is the only way that you can do that.” The funders we interviewed who are committed to policy work share at least one core belief: in terms of return on investment, policy change delivers the biggest bang for the buck. Yet, less than 5 percent of philanthropy’s big bets—the largest and most influential gifts to social change—go to policy work.²

The growing gap between policy and politics

Increasingly, policy and politics operate in different worlds—and it’s the noisy world of politics that drowns out the quieter world of policy. Politics is becoming more polarized and tribal. There’s plenty of data to back this up: party-line voting, fewer swing voters, fewer swing districts, and an explosion of funding flowing into campaigns.³ Pew Research Center data shows a dismal decline in the positive sentiment that voters of either party hold for the other.⁴ And marriage across the political aisle?⁵ That’s become a third rail for nearly 40 percent of both Democrats and Republican voters. Back in 1960, only 4 percent of voters of either party said they would be displeased if their son or daughter married someone of the opposite party.⁶

Candidates often take their cues from this increased polarization—they can dwell on those wedge policy issues that draw the greatest distinction from the other party. They craft maximalist positions that most appeal to their base of voters, whether the issue is gun control or immigration. These are issues where policy movement is least likely.

Despite this, many policy issues do move forward with bipartisan support. “The importance of bipartisan and nonpartisan actors is not less than in the past,” says Frances Lee, professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton. “The system requires it as a reality of shared power, and divided government has been the norm 75 percent of the time since 1980. The reality of the system is that this is how things get done.”

Indeed, hidden behind the rhetoric around political polarization and congressional gridlock is the reality that policy output has remained steady over the past seven decades, as fewer but much longer bills have made their way to the president’s desk.⁷ And legislation that has passed has enjoyed wide bipartisan support: in most congresses, the laws that pass—including the most significant legislation—receive support from 70 percent of minority-party members or more.⁸ They’re often big, sweeping laws that inflame fewer passions on the campaign trail.

In this environment, the policy issues that move forward often start in local communities or states, have narratives that appeal to a majority of voters, and are framed in aspirational and easily understood ways.

Still, we found those big bets have been critical to fuel movements. In that earlier research, we looked at a spectrum of widely regarded social movements—from the rejuvenation of conservatism in the 1970s and '80s to the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights in recent decades—and found that more than 70 percent received a pivotal big bet from philanthropy, according to Bridgespan research. Susan Urahn, president and CEO of The Pew Charitable Trusts, reflects that “achieving policy change requires patient and strategic funding, and philanthropy has the potential to be a key resource.”

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SUSAN URAHN, PRESIDENT AND CEO, THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

So, what keeps so many funders on the sidelines? Some operate with an indelible mental separation that eliminates policy work from consideration. Philanthropy is one pocket and politics is another. Donor advisors tend to stick to that stance, though advocacy work is distinct from political work: giving to a group that advocates for policy change is different from writing checks to candidates. And while some philanthropists are skittish about funding policy advocacy out of concern that it could run afoul of tax laws or regulations, that fear is for the most part unfounded. Law firms that specialize in this work advise philanthropists on how to legally accomplish their priorities. For a deeper dive into the legal landscape of philanthropic engagement with policy change, [Bolder Advocacy has a strategy guide](#). Bridgespan also has a resource specifically for funders interested in supporting advocacy organizations in the United States that aren't 501(c)(3) nonprofits. For an overview of how and why funders may use different advocacy tools, see our recent publication “[Using All the Tools in the Toolkit: Funding Advocacy for Social Change](#).”

For many other donors, policy work is too intangible, or they are unfamiliar with the policy landscape and how to win. In our experience, many organizations working to advance policy objectives can also seem built around “fighting the good fight” without a clear pathway for how they are going to prevail. Further, the sense that wading into policy carries real reputational risk for a funder can be among the biggest of these roadblocks—we heard from funders that it can feel “dirty” to engage in policy fights.

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MARK NUNNELLY, PHILANTHROPIST

people most interested in policy—ranging from climate to democracy work—that being incremental is not the right approach. Yet it is how progress happens.”

In our own experience, a focus on a state-by-state and step-by-step incremental approach can address many of these barriers to funder engagement. It can lower the impression of risk, help make progress tangible, and offer discrete observable milestones that demonstrate impact. “I’m attracted to concrete opportunities that can have real impact,” philanthropist and former Bridgespan board member Mark Nunnelly says. “There is a feeling among many

Figure 1. Years from the creation of a movement intermediary to a significant federal victory



Source: The Bridgespan Group



Anatomy of a Successful Movement

The 10 major US policy movements we studied shared prominent elements that epitomize an incremental approach. Among them: the ability to identify multiple potentially winnable battlefields, a focus on narrative change, an embrace of unlikely allies, and intermediaries that are laser-focused on putting wins on the board. We'll focus in this section on how those elements show up in a few of those policy movements, including sentencing reform and marriage equality.



1. Multiple battlefields with the potential for wins

A key facet of all the movements we analyzed was the ability to locate several battlefields that offer real promise of victory based on carefully considered opportunity mapping. Social movement-driven policy change almost never starts with legislators in DC. It almost always starts locally—often at the municipal level first and then the state level. Not all the battles will be won, to be sure. Opposition forces will dig in and fight back on multiple fronts, as we describe below. But if a movement catches on, it snowballs before becoming national policy. Sometimes it can also be the pursuit of partial policy steps like the path from medical marijuana to full legalization. Most often this succession of battlefields is geographic, as with marriage equality.

It was a long road to the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision, a federal “thunderbolt” that held that the 14th Amendment requires states to license and recognize marriage for same-sex couples. The journey began in Hawaii, where the state’s supreme court ruled in 1993 that a marriage suit brought by same-sex couples couldn’t be summarily dismissed. The win was short lived, though, as opponents in Hawaii short-circuited the state court’s work by passing a constitutional ban, and opponents nationally enlisted Congress to pass the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996.

Hawaii may have been a false start in terms of policy, but it galvanized the movement. Advocates began to focus on winning in states that—through careful analysis—appeared to have sympathetic courts. They first settled on Vermont, where that state’s high court ruled that the legislature had to enact either marriage or “civil union” legislation. The state chose civil union in 2000 since any protection for same-sex couples was controversial at the time.

Then came Massachusetts, where a 2003 Massachusetts’ Supreme Judicial Court ruling made marriage equality state law. Advocates endured years of intense battling to hold onto the win against opposition from federal and state elected officials across party lines. Meanwhile, the movement experienced narrow state court losses in New York, Maryland, and New Jersey and in multiple states where marriage was used as a wedge electoral issue by conservatives.

Advocates finally won a second state in 2008, when the Supreme Court of California ruled in favor of the freedom to marry—only to be undone by the voters in the same year. Again: two steps forward, one step back. And yet, tireless advocates persisted.

By 2009, state supreme courts in Connecticut and Iowa ruled in favor of marriage equality, along with victories in state legislatures in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. The

movement had carefully considered the makeup of state supreme courts and legislatures in these early states and prioritized lawsuits or legislative campaigns in each.

Still, painful losses along the way continued, including in the states prioritized by advocates. At the ballot, where the pro-marriage equality side never brought a statewide initiative until 2012, supporters lost 30 measures advanced by opponents in a row before they achieved victories.⁹ Yet somehow, by the time *Obergefell v. Hodges* reached the Supreme Court, 37 states and the District of Columbia had already granted the freedom to marry.¹⁰ All of the strategically additive skirmishes along the way had built critical mass and created the climate for national change.

Mapping out the battlefields and prioritizing where to battle is a crucial part of a successful policy movement, even knowing that a favorable battlefield for a challenging policy issue can still lead to a stinging loss. That strategic mapping might feel like a shift for some earlier stage organizers. In our interview with Ai-jen Poo, president of the [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#), she talked of her organization’s evolution from the early days of engagement that was more singularly responsive to local needs toward a more mature organization with strategic battlefield selection. “Back then it was really more bottoms up—listening for where there was energy,” she says. “But now there’s a whole rubric, logic, and criteria. Where are there high densities of domestic workers? Where do we have capacity and affiliates where we could strategically launch? Where is the politics ripe for something like this?”

We see similarities in the movement for sentencing reform and its strategic selection of where to engage. While the movement for marriage equality had a singular goal, activists and intermediary organizations in the sentencing reform movement are pursuing a range of policies. Also, sentencing reform is but one element of many in the larger—and very



The White House lit up in rainbow colors to commemorate the US Supreme Court’s decision affirming the constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry in June 2015. (Photo: AdobeStock/renaschild)

much ongoing—criminal justice reform movement, just as marriage equality is but one of many elements in the larger—and very much ongoing—movement for LGBTQ+ rights.

Starting in the 1970s, state and federal sentencing laws got tougher and tougher, culminating in the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. In the late 1990s, a movement to reform sentencing and reduce incarceration began to emerge. After many years of effort, in 2010 reform viability began gaining steam and elected officials began enacting notable reforms to reduce extreme punishments. In time, groups like the [Alliance for Safety and Justice](#), [Right On Crime](#), and Pew’s Justice Reinvestment Initiative formed and worked tirelessly to change state laws. Their efforts paid off with numerous reforms enacted at the state level to reduce lengthy sentencing and broad reforms of federal sentencing in 2018.

Between 2007 and 2018, at least 35 states had reformed or repealed mandatory minimums, many starting with nonviolent drug offenses.¹¹ Lenore Anderson, co-founder and president of the Alliance for Safety and Justice and founder of [Californians for Safety and Justice](#), points to the carefully selected battlefield of California. For her, the 2014 passage of Proposition 47, which recategorized a range of nonviolent offenses from felonies to misdemeanors, was a pivotal moment for sentencing reform.

It was the first time in US history that voters voted to change numerous penal code sections for the explicit purpose of reducing incarceration and reallocating prison money to prevention and treatment. The measure reduced incarceration in California by more than 15,000 people and has invested nearly a billion dollars into youth programs, reentry, and behavioral health treatment. Since Proposition 47, California legislators and voters have enacted more than a dozen other sentencing reform changes, leading the state to the most significant drop in incarceration rates in the nation.

Other winnable battlefields that the sentencing reform movement targeted include Michigan, where the 2002 repeal of almost all mandatory drug sentences led to prison releases exceeding admissions in subsequent years and a fall in the state’s crime rate of 35 percent in a decade.¹² In Pennsylvania, after the Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that many of that state’s mandatory minimum sentences were unconstitutional, crime rates and the state’s prison population have declined. Louisiana repealed many of its mandatory minimums in 2017, and by 2022, the state prison population had fallen 24 percent and the state had saved \$153 million, reinvesting \$107 million into crime-reduction and victim support groups.¹³ In recent months, though, the “tough on crime” approach has regained its foothold in that state.¹⁴

To be sure, the sentencing reform movement has also suffered plenty of losses. In 2003, Congress created, increased, or expanded nearly 40 mandatory minimum sentences for federal crimes. In 2017, the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act failed despite bipartisan support.

But in 2018, federal legislation reversed what had been a nearly four-decades-long trend toward longer, harsher sentences at the federal level. Congress signed into law the First Step Act, which included key parts of the defeated Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act, shortened federal mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent drug offenses, eased a federal “three strikes” rule, and made sentencing reforms retroactive.¹⁵ This was the moment when the federal pendulum had clearly swung in the direction of sentencing reform.



2. Policy change follows narrative change

Anderson, of the Alliance for Safety and Justice, fondly remembers witnessing the new voices and changed narratives that emerged to usher in significant reforms across the country. From roughly the 1970s to the 2010s, the debate on criminal justice reform had largely been within a rigid narrative construct—you could either be for criminal justice reform or for public safety. In that false dichotomy, you were never for both. Reformers—who were largely led by the voices of civil libertarians and criminal defense attorneys—built their argument around the rights of the people who were incarcerated. “That was the face and voice of reform in state capitols across the country, going up against law enforcement and victims groups,” Anderson told us in an interview. “Who’s going to win that debate every single time?”

Narratives began to shift in state capitols when Anderson and other safety and criminal justice reformers enlisted a diverse group of crime victims as a new group of stakeholders who viewed public safety and sentence reduction as complementary rather than oppositional. Survivors of sexual assault and other violent crimes, and others who had lost family members to gun violence, began to stand up and advocate against harsh sentencing and increased investment in prisons, and in favor of increased rehabilitation resources, investment in prevention, and support for underserved victims.

“These crime victims would say, ‘Please don’t build this prison. We think that’s a waste of money,’” says Anderson. “You could hear a pin drop. This lawmaker literally looks up from his desk and says, ‘Where have you been for the last 30 years? This is exactly the voice that’s been missing.’” This was an inflection point for the movement—they had shifted the narrative from “tough on crime” to “smart on crime” and collapsed a decades-old false dichotomy.

“It was a major narrative intervention to make this not about criminal justice reform versus safety, but to make it a healthy debate about the best pathway to public safety,” says



The 2018 First Step Act was the moment when the federal pendulum had clearly swung in the direction of sentencing reform. (Photo: AdobeStock/bluraz)

Anderson. “We want a balanced approach to safety. We want victims to get help. We want crime prevention and reduced incarceration, not a dangerous path to public safety that’s focused on costly and violent prisons that do little for rehabilitation.”

It’s clear that efforts of ambitious policy reform can’t take flight without deliberate narrative change. Humans learn through story. Effective narrative creates meaningful connections across differences, moves us to be more empathetic, and galvanizes people around what’s possible.

[The Fight for \\$15](#) was born in New York City in 2012. It began with just 200 fast-food workers walking off the job to demand union rights and a \$15 per hour wage. The federal minimum wage has been stagnant since 2009 at \$7.25, so when advocates in New York and elsewhere aligned around a \$15 goal, many thought that seemed unrealistic. The Fight for \$15 proved otherwise. Just over a decade later, 14 states and the District of Columbia have gotten to, or are on their way to, that \$15 mark,¹⁶ improving the livelihoods of 26 million people across the country.¹⁷

“You can’t win without a narrative that is appealing to 70 percent or more of the public,” says Hanauer of Civic Ventures. For years, the minimum wage was framed as a tug of war between fairness for the lowest paid workers and economic growth. Civic Ventures has worked to shift away from that zero-sum narrative to one in which everyone wins when regular people have money in their pockets. The narrative that “when workers are paid more money, businesses have more customers and hire more workers” anchored the Fight for \$15. This helped create a policy language about growing the economy “from the middle out,” which the public could embrace. It also helps that \$15 is a compelling round number. That push for federal policy change continues—with a clear finish line.

The long battle for marriage equality also had a pivotal narrative shift, one borne of necessity as the movement appeared to hit a wall after Californians voted in 2008 to revoke the right of same-sex couples to marry. While the movement always emphasized personal stories, many of the talking points that movement organizations deployed emphasized the myriad rights and benefits that accompanied marriage. The pro-marriage equality side thought that if it simply made the case about the injustice of being denied hospital visitation rights and equal tax treatment, straight folks would see the light.

What was missing, though, was that neither LGBTQ+ people nor straight people viewed marriage as being primarily about benefits. Marriage at its core is about love and commitment. So the marriage equality movement pivoted to a focus on demonstrating that same-sex couples wanted to marry for the same reason that straight couples did—out of deep love and lifelong commitment.

Freedom to Marry led the movement in cracking that code, working with partners like [Third Way](#). Informed by deep public opinion research, the “love and commitment” messaging shifted the conversation from fairness and equality to a conversation focused on treating others as one wants to be treated. Public opinion and state-level policy wins began to trend strongly upward. In fact, co-author Marc Solomon remembers watching oral arguments at the Supreme Court in 2015 when opponents explicitly argued that marriage was *not* about love and commitment, but instead about procreation. At that moment, he knew that it was soon to be game, set, and match for the freedom to marry side.



3. Embracing strange bedfellows

Successful movements also recognize the importance of embracing unlikely allies—this approach scrambles fixed lines of conflicts, enabling progress on divisive issues. When Alliance for Safety and Justice begins its sentencing reform work in a state, it engages early on with a wide range of stakeholders who hold influence in state policy-making, including victims, prosecutors, law enforcement, and business and faith leaders, to explore where there might be opportunities for collaboration, knowing that without their support or acquiescence, progress will be next to impossible. Although marriage equality is generally seen as a liberal cause, Freedom to Marry created [Young Conservatives for the Freedom to Marry](#) to demonstrate that Republicans were not monolithically opposed to marriage equality. Each time a key Republican voiced support—whether Vice President Dick Cheney, First Lady Laura Bush, or Senator Rob Portman—it amplified that support broadly across communications channels.

The Pew Charitable Trusts has a long track record of supporting the creation of coalitions of unlikely allies. It was a major backer from the outset of [Right on Crime](#), a conservative policy group, which became central to the successes of sentencing reform. It's also worth noting that the Nixon administration passed one of the most significant pieces of environmental legislation in US history—the 1970 amendment to the Clean Air Act, which built on the Kennedy administration's original 1963 bill—and established the Environmental Protection Agency.

Indeed, seven of the 10 policy movements we studied involved just such surprising coalitions. It's not necessarily how we think of it today, but the anti-abortion movement's coalition of Protestant Evangelicals and conservative Catholics from the Northeast and Midwest crossed party lines in ways that were remarkable at the time.

A deeper dive into related research

Bridgespan has a growing body of knowledge work at the intersection of policy, advocacy, and philanthropy.

- For a closer look at the sequence of events over decades for two policy change movements, explore our interactive [timelines for sentencing reform and marriage equality](#).
- For an overview of how and why funders may use different advocacy tools, see our recent publication "[Using All the Tools in the Toolkit: Funding Advocacy for Social Change](#)."
- For a primer on politically active philanthropy, see our 2018 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article "[When Philanthropy Meets Advocacy](#)."



4. How intermediary organizations supercharge movements

Most of the movements we analyzed saw the emergence of highly effective “intermediary organizations” driving national strategy—groups that recognize the centrality of incremental wins in reaching a bold outcome and have a single-minded focus on executing a multiyear strategy to achieve those wins and bring about that outcome. Legacy advocacy organizations often do not play this role. Their policy positions and reputations can be too entrenched to adopt new narratives and can limit their appetite for cultivating unlikely allies to the cause. It can also be hard to zero in on a single or limited set of policy goals if they are pursuing a wide range of important advocacy goals. Nonetheless, their deep relationships in state capitols and expansive membership bases make them crucial players in supporting policy advances.

Effective intermediary organizations emerge at unpredictable moments in the lifespan of a movement—unencumbered by the typical constraints of legacy movement organizations. They see how to build momentum to take advantage of a shifting Overton window to set tangible and achievable policy goals. (See “[Moving the Overton window.](#)”) They know how to design strategic roadmaps, galvanize donors, enlist unexpected allies to the cause, build and support effective state campaign efforts, and doggedly accrue those incremental wins that drive national victories. As we surveyed a range of organizations that accomplish this, several characteristics became clear.

Moving the Overton window

Grassroots advocates and more radical actors are crucial for what’s known as shifting the Overton window—a political science concept that describes the range of policies that is politically acceptable to the mainstream. For a policy outside of the Overton window, rather than changing the policy, advocates may attempt to move the Overton window—essentially the public discourse—so that what initially seemed politically outlandish at one moment shifts into the mainstream. As more radical voices lift up an idea, mainstream actors work within the political system to secure a compromise position, the public becomes increasingly comfortable, and at least some dimensions of the more radical idea become palatable.

Policy proposals that appeared completely unrealistic—say, legalizing marijuana at the state level, enacting a \$15 per hour minimum wage, or allowing gay people to marry—have now become part of mainstream discourse. Co-author Marc Solomon remembers veteran gay rights advocates telling him, in the early days of advocating for marriage, that even using the “M” word would set the movement back years—perhaps irredeemably so. He marvels that what was once a cause that politicians avoided at all costs was one of the very few issues that secured bipartisan support in 2022 with the passage of the federal Respect for Marriage Act.

Grassroots organizing, winning at a municipal level, winning in a first few states—those are all crucial forces that shift the Overton window. Yet frequently, it is a different set of leaders or organizations that then figure out how to translate that

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opening into policy gains across a critical mass of states. Graham Boyd, an attorney specializing in political efforts to reform drug laws and end mass incarceration, is the founding director of New Approach PAC, which has spearheaded and secured wins in 22 state-level marijuana legalization ballot initiatives over the past decade. He saw that with the widespread acceptance of medical marijuana, the Overton window had shifted and that in some states the public might be open to practical arguments for full marijuana legalization.

Boyd offered a memorable description of the productive tension between some of the pioneering grassroots groups and more mainstream organizations in achieving policy change. “There are plenty of long-term activists who are pragmatic and understand that going door-to-door in tie-dye T-shirts in a middle-class neighborhood will be counterproductive,” he says. Those are the activists he collaborates with. “But there’s always activists who don’t see things that way and think that rolling up a 10-foot joint and lighting it on fire in the town square is exactly what’s going to wake everybody up and make them want to vote ‘yes.’” Boyd does not agree with them but says he would never do anything to thwart them either. “If they describe my campaign as bad, for a mainstream voter it’s like, ‘Oh, if they think this is too conservative an idea, then maybe I *do* want to vote for it.’”

Not every movement has as clear an endpoint as the marriage equality fight. It’s crucial, though, to make movement goals clear to showcase progress and build momentum. After losing his brother to suicide, Bill Smith founded [Inseparable](#) to bring a campaign mentality to mental health advocacy, with specific goals around closing the treatment gap, championing youth mental health, and improving crisis response.

Inseparable believes that wins beget wins, so they’ve focused on notching policy gains in strategically selected states to improve access to care and build momentum for transformative national change. Since its inception in 2021, Inseparable has passed 23 bills in 11 states, from Alabama, where a new law requires a school mental health services coordinator in every school district, to Montana, which created a \$300 million dedicated fund for mental health.¹⁸ Incremental wins can accrue quickly, when conditions are ripe and organizations act strategically.

Hanauer told us that effective intermediary organizations are “strategy first, coalition second.” This runs counter to how most progressives think, where the impulse is to get everyone to the table, he says. “Big coalitions never build great strategies,” he says. “Great civic products and good strategy attract strong coalitions.”

Standout intermediary organizations put a strategy for winning at their core, identify and pursue multiple pathways to a victory, and focus on building momentum every day. They scour the map for multiple levers—from ballots and legislation to lawsuits—and battlefields at multiple levels of government—from municipal to federal. They assess the makeup of state courts and legislatures, understanding the priorities of governors and attorneys general. Their approach means gauging the advocacy landscape in potential target states—both those aligned and those in opposition. And then it means making difficult decisions

about when and where to engage—which requires saying no to advocates in certain geographies where winning is less likely.

“Every campaign has to have strategic insight,” says Rashad Robinson, president of the racial justice organization [Color Of Change](#). “I think it’s evaluating what is winnable, what people are willing to get behind. It’s about finding the areas that, if we push, we can have force multiplication abilities.”

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When funders catalyze intermediaries

In some cases, a group of like-minded funders have launched formal intermediary organizations. Consider the birth of Californians for Safety and Justice and subsequently the Alliance for Safety and Justice. In 2011, a US Supreme Court ruling required California to reduce overcrowding in its state prison system. Several key funders—Ford Foundation, Rosenberg Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and others—saw this as a crucial opportunity.

After a landscape analysis, these funders found no single organization to play this role. Instead, they turned to Lenore Anderson, then a criminal justice expert working for the prosecutor’s office in San Francisco. “I crafted and proposed the vision for Californians for Safety and Justice,” says Anderson, “an organization that would bring together unlikely constituencies, that would call for bold but viable reforms, and that would advance both c3 and c4 strategies to win state law changes.”

After Californians for Safety and Justice was formed, they surveyed California voters and found more support for bold justice reform than existed among most members of the state legislature. Californians for Safety and Justice decided to go directly to the voters with an ambitious ballot initiative that became the successful 2014 Proposition 47 campaign. “It was pretty bold at the time,” says Anderson. “We took six low-level crimes, reclassified them from felony to misdemeanor, and required the state to reallocate prison funding to community-based crime prevention.” The result: a reallocation of more than \$800 million from prisons to prevention and community safety programs.

On the strength of that critical win, and with deeper support from the original group of funders and newly engaged ones, Anderson launched a national organization to build on the momentum in California. The Alliance for Safety and Justice now works in eight of the largest states, including some of the most challenging, like Texas and Florida. “I think the early work of Californians for Safety and Justice, including Prop. 47, was one of the key things that allowed philanthropy to get more comfortable investing in policy advocacy in sentencing reform,” says Anderson. “And Californians for Safety and Justice was born from a philanthropic experiment to provide greater resources and flexibility.”

Funders, What's Next?

When Nick Hanauer decided to launch Civic Ventures, he sought out the wisdom of other funders who have a deep commitment to policy change as a tool for maximizing social impact. “We looked around at the best available model that we should attempt to emulate,” he says. “We went straight to Tim Gill.” Hanauer wasn’t starting from scratch—he had run campaigns and engaged in strategic philanthropy. He also had an ambition to push big policy changes and saw Gill as a guide and mentor because of his role in the marriage equality movement. Gill had shown what was possible when philanthropy engages deeply, over the long haul, in major policy change movements. “That’s a guy who wanted to do a hard thing and went out and did it,” says Hanauer.

We hope that funders have at least a few clear takeaways from this piece as they consider engagement in policy work with an incremental approach: policy change is not as fraught as it may seem, the potential for philanthropic impact remains largely untapped, and the landscape of opportunity is rich. We encourage funders to become familiar with outstanding intermediary organizations that pursue ambitious, incremental strategies toward transformative ends. And we encourage funders to support these intermediaries with flexible, long-term funding that enables them to be responsive and opportunistic, while also building durable infrastructure that can be used in the next phase of the movement or when the inevitable backlash occurs. Look for those possible “philanthropic experiments,” to borrow Lenore Anderson’s phrase.

“I’m interested in helping funders think about what type of world they want to live in—that helps them reframe policy wins,” says Megan Ming Francis, associate professor of political science and an associate professor of law, societies, and justice at the University of Washington. “Large-scale change needs an extended time horizon—look at the Civil Rights Movement.”

Ai-jen Poo of the National Domestic Workers Alliance echoes that sentiment. “Patient investment is really important,” she says. “Where our relationships with funders have been most successful is when we build toward the transformational—as opposed to transactional—and become co-strategists and co-conspirators.”

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AI-JEN POO, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS ALLIANCE

Above we’ve explored several ongoing policy movements ripe for deeper funder engagement. There are plenty of others building momentum on the state and local level with parallel federal advocacy—from residential zoning reform to lower the cost of housing to public funding of early childhood education. They span issues perceived to be across the political spectrum in the United States and range from the wonky to the well understood. Many are being supported by results-oriented nonprofit intermediaries that are gathering unlikely allies around new, broadly appealing narratives. Almost all are working stepwise at the local level: two steps forward and one step back at a time.

In short, we believe more funders should bet on the tortoise. Berman and Fox, authors of *Gradual*, make clear the strengths of that wager. “Incrementalism is nothing less than the endless, ongoing effort to alleviate injustices,” they conclude. “It is a mindset. And it is our best hope for continuing to improve the world even in an age of radical rhetoric.”



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Civitas Public Affairs Group works with leaders from across the political spectrum to build and execute bold advocacy initiatives. The organization supports the country’s leading philanthropists, thought leaders, not-for-profits, and centers of influence in shaping public policy at the local, state, and federal levels.

Endnotes

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