

The Overton window

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I have just added the entry reproduced below on the Overton window in the glossary, as suggested by a commentator yesterday.

Why is this relevant now? Because I think we do need to shift the Overton window, which is very badly off-centre at present and is moving in the case of many Tory policies into the area of unthinkable policy.

I would suggest that [my last post](#) was about the policy needed to relocate the Overton window.

So too might [this comment](#) this morning be about that.

The Overton window is named after Joseph Overton, the US think-tank policy specialist who is credited with creating it.

The theory originally suggested policy exists on a spectrum plotted vertically to prevent that there is a left-right orientation to the analysis. The spectrum as originally proposed was as follows:

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

The idea was, however, inevitably used to describe the left-right spectrum and so

became in that context:

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

Overton suggested that it was the job of think tanks to identify the range in which policies existed and to then promote ideas that then shifted policy in the direction that they wished to promote.

The term is more generally used to describe where the centre of opinion is located on a left-right spectrum, the consensus being that the neoliberal era has shifted it markedly to the right with the 'Overton window' being located as a result some way from the midpoint in the noted range.

When viewed in this way as a spectrum the term 'policy' makes little sense and the term compromise might replace both popular and policy. The results is this range:

- * Unthinkable
- * Radical
- * Acceptable
- * Sensible
- * Compromise
- * Sensible
- * Acceptable
- * Radical
- * Unthinkable

The centre ground is not ideological in this perspective, but is instead focussed on the management of consensus.

Although the term is often used to describe politics in general it may be more useful to use it as an analytical tool to address particular issues and to consider where public opinion is on that topic. For example, the issue of whether the state should subsidise public schools with tax breaks could be plotted in this way, moving from yes it should through various conditionalities until the point where subsidy should not be supplied is proposed and the possible mechanisms to shift opinion could then be explored. This was the way in which Overton imagined that his idea might be used.