

Moving Mindsets:

*The Public Imperative
for Policy Change*



**Want to shift mindsets?
Ensure policy reforms endure?
Change the social order?**

***Focus your efforts on the
public, not policymakers.***

To be sure, policymakers' mindsets shape their decision-making. But that's not the whole story.

Policymaker mindsets are shaped by the broader culture they operate in. Not only do policymakers share broader cultural mindsets, but they are hyper-attuned to them—because their tenure relies on their ability to align their actions with these ways of thinking. Their decisions are influenced by *shifts* in this thinking that alter political incentives and increase pressure on policymakers.

While direct policymaker lobbying has a role in changing policies, for policy to endure, policymakers must be fundamentally and continually motivated by public demand for action and solutions on a given issue.

This means that durable social change depends on shifting *public* mindsets.

What Makes a Mindset?

A mindset is a shared way of thinking that frequently works at the subconscious level. Mindsets profoundly color our views of the world and how we interact within it. Importantly, they lend legitimacy to certain social norms and problematize others.

Mindsets Are:

- **Ways of organizing experience**
- **Culturally specific**
- **Stories we tell ourselves about the world**
- **Durable—enduring over wide time horizons**





Mindsets Are Not:

- **Attitudes—which are narrowly focused**
- **Beliefs—which are conclusions vs. ways of thinking**
- **Social norms—not every mindset becomes causal or normative**
- **Worldviews—which are singular and static, while mindsets are multiple and can shift**

Mindset Pivot Points

Mindsets can change, and with them, policies and cultural constructs. Certain moments in history offer “perfect storms” of dynamics particularly susceptible to en masse mindset shifts.

Historic Mindset Pivots

 <p>The Great Depression</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Mindsets about the role of government and its responsibilities shift, policy follows	<h3>Common Threads</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">— Outsized levels of public engagement— Thinking about key issues is “up for grabs”— Individual autonomy vs. government responsibility hangs in balance— Paradigm shifts with velocity that either <i>creates</i> or <i>closes</i> openings for change
 <p>World War II</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Mindsets around family shift and shape state welfare programs	
 <p>9/11</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Common adversary increases xenophobia and yields insular mindset, leading to foreign and domestic policy changes	
 <p>Same-Sex Marriage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Mindsets recapitulate around gender and sex, policies change	
 <p>COVID-19 + Racial Inequity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">— Jury’s still out—but significant shifts are likely	

Policy Change: A Public Affair

Social and policy change are enabled when the environment in which policymakers operate evolves, creating an opening for the desired change. And that requires a series of coordinated mindset shifts.

It's only logical that policy change efforts should focus on shifting policymakers' mindsets, right? Actually, it's not so simple. Policymakers do not change their mindsets—or their votes—in a vacuum. Therefore, **advocacy in favor of a significant and durable policy change needs to target mindset shifts among a critical mass of the *public***. The context in which policymakers make judgments must change in order for their mindsets and policy choices to overcome the inertia of existing norms. Public mindsets—and the pressure that comes with them—are a critical incentive for change.

The challenge, then, for social movement leaders is to design and implement a strategy that works in parallel to influence both public and policymaker mindsets in tandem.

Case in point: the shaping of public opinion and policy around tobacco, a public health threat that enjoyed centuries of acceptance and limited public regulation before evolving into an issue of public concern and policy action. Education campaigns didn't work; they only stoked individualistic thinking and failed to crack people's thinking about personal rights and responsibilities for a "rightfully earned" vice. Only when anti-smoking efforts deliberately framed the "bad actors" of the tobacco industry as conspiring to mislead the public about risks and endanger health did public thinking shift and policymakers act—acknowledging the role of government in protecting the public from corporate malfeasance.

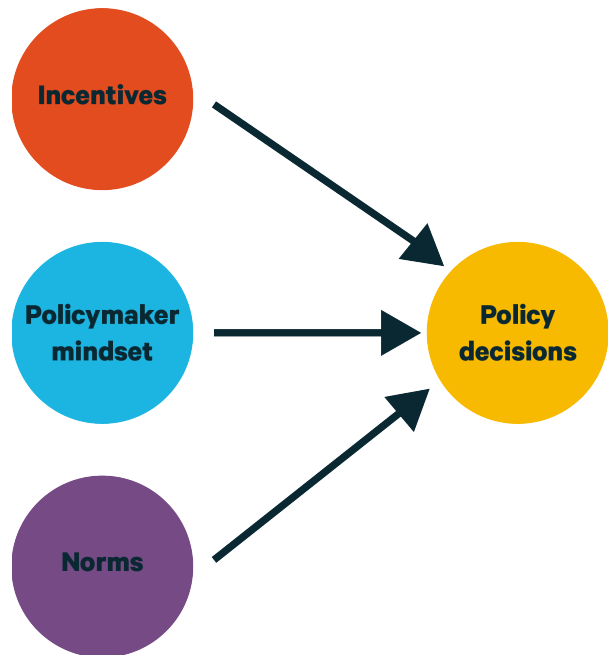
Public Mindsets Matter: 4 Reasons

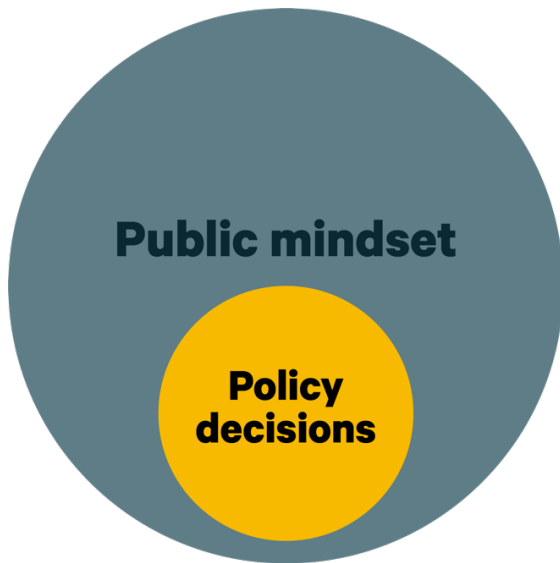
Here's why policy change demands more than policymakers alone at the (metaphoric) table.

Reason #1

Policy decisions are complicated.

They are made through multidimensional decision-making based on policymakers' mindsets, political incentives, and social norms. Therefore, if you focus on just one leg of the stool—policymaker mindsets—to evoke policy change, you risk missing the nuanced layers of the decision-making process, and efforts are likely to yield diluted partial effects. Shifts in public mindsets bring about changes to social norms, alter political incentives, *and* influence policymaker mindsets.





Reason #2

Policymakers respond to shifts in public thinking.

Research bears this out: Across federal and state levels and government branches, policy leaders may each see an issue through a particular lens, but on the whole they are demonstrably influenced by cultural mindsets. Their decision-making happens within a context that creates space and pressure for change. The evolution of early childhood policy is an example of this effect. As public thinking about the importance

of early development grew more robust, so did demand for policies that supported children in this critical period of development. Policy decisions followed suit, with more funding going to support young children and families. At the same time, the shift in public mindset, and the pressure it created, has made reducing or cutting such supports, even in tight times, nearly impossible.

Reason #3

Policymakers are people, too.

There's a broadly held misconception that leaders in Washington and state capitals are a different breed, operating in a parallel universe. But they're more like the rest of us than it may seem. Evidence shows that policymaker and public mindsets are close cousins and that policy leaders are influenced by broader cultural mindsets, just like the rest of us.

Reason #4

Shifting public mindsets is key to unleashing *durable* change.

The social order is based on durable mindsets—not ideas that come and go with elected officials at every changing of the guard. Shifting public mindsets, rather than focusing on policymakers' mindsets, is the key to unlocking that durable change. It creates powerful, sustainable pressure for a given norm over time—regardless of who holds public office. If we focus exclusively on shifting policymaker mindsets, change is likely to be fleeting.

Conclusion

Like those decision-making institutions that influence our lives and livelihoods, public culture is an institution itself—arguably our most important institution of all. Simply put, public mindsets matter and must be prioritized in any effective social change effort.

A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt. A movement that changes both people and institutions is a revolution.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

About FrameWorks

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For more: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/mindset-shifts-what-are-they-why-do-they-matter-how-do-they-happen/>

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