

Democratic State Committee Report

Shifting the Overton Window

By Daniel Marks Cohen

The Overton Window is a concept from Joseph P. Overton, who created the idea named for him at a Michigan think tank in the '90s. The idea is that public policy ideas are generally within a “window” of public acceptance, and anything outside the window is dismissed as absurd or impractical or impossible. The concept of “shifting the Overton window” on an idea generally means that an idea that was initially dismissed is now reconsidered as possible, even preferable. We are all seeing that right now, in the Black Lives Matter movement. The idea of defunding the police (which really means substantially cutting the police budget, not eliminating it entirely) has gone from almost

impossible to imagine to most likely to occur – consider that the 2016 budget under former City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito passed overwhelmingly (Brooklyn’s Inez Barron was the sole dissenter), and at that time it included \$170 million for 1,300 more police officers. That is hard to imagine happening now in this current climate, and it speaks to how far the BLM movement has moved the focus away from the status quo on the priorities of the council. Another way to say this is that the BLM movement has shifted the Overton window on public support of police funding, from totally virtually unchallenged support to questioning and reallocating.

There have been other shifts in the Overton window – gay marriage went from being a fringe concept (I recall that the marriage alternative once being bandied about at the time was “civil union”) to

approved in New York (through the longstanding work of our Assemblyman Danny O'Donnell in 2011), and then Supreme Court cases (US v. Windsor in 2012 and Obergefell v. Hodges in 2015), and then it became law. Here too, the long work of LGBTQ activists and allies over many years helped bring it about, shifting the Overton window on LGBTQ rights and equality.

And there are still others to come – national healthcare, the Green New Deal, and more. So what does shifting the Overton window actually document? I believe it recognizes the culmination of a change in public policy, that it is a way of capturing the moment when activist action rises to the point of acceptability, and change is broadly, publicly witnessed. Moving the window, changing the policy, is the product of many years of work, often with little hope of immediate

change, but fueled by righteous fire, the world is shifted. That some of us may have seen the path of change early on (sometimes I have, sometimes I haven't) – for whatever the cause, but that so many more of us are now part of the movement for transformation is what makes this point in time, full of uncertainty, also full of another thing: hope. Hope that maybe we CAN make the changes we seek, to make our city, and state, and country better. The work is not finished; in some cases it has not even begun. But it is there for us to join. And I, no doubt like many of you, am excited to be a part of it.