



Advocacy Coalition Framework

How coalitions of actors and beliefs contest policy change within policy subsystems

The concept

The Advocacy Coalition Framework, developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, treats policy change as the product of competition between coalitions of actors who share a set of policy beliefs and who deploy resources and strategies within a policy subsystem. Three sets of conditions shape what is possible: relatively stable parameters, such as basic constitutional structure and sociocultural values; long-term coalition opportunity structures, such as the openness of the political system; and external events, including changes in socio-economic conditions, public opinion, and the wider policy environment. Outcomes emerge through institutional rules, policy outputs and policy impacts, which in turn feed back into the contest between coalitions. The framework is particularly useful where policy is contested, where multiple actors are involved, and where reform requires the rebalancing of competing belief systems rather than the simple imposition of a new design.

In practice

We applied the Advocacy Coalition Framework to a national commissioning framework for the health and social services sector, with a particular focus on community-based care and maternity care. The framework helped us read the field of competing coalitions, recognise where the stable parameters would not move, and identify the points at which short-term constraints and resources could be shifted. The resulting commissioning architecture was designed to be intelligible to all of the coalitions in the subsystem, even where it could not, in any given moment, satisfy them all.

Questions we ask in client strategy conversations

- Which coalitions are operating in this policy subsystem, and what core beliefs hold each together?
- Which of the stable parameters are genuinely stable, and which are merely being treated as such?
- What external events are reshaping the coalition opportunity structures, and over what horizon?
- Where is the realistic space for institutional rules and policy outputs to shift, and at what cost?

Questions to ask yourselves

- Have we mistaken our own coalition's beliefs for an objective reading of the field?
- Are we underestimating the durability of opposing coalitions because they are presently quiet?
- When we have failed to secure change, was it the design at fault or our reading of the coalition landscape?
- Where in our own organisation are competing belief coalitions producing the friction we cannot resolve?

Red flags we look for

- A reform programme that takes no account of the coalitions whose support, or at least neutrality, it requires.
- An assumption that policy outputs alone will produce the desired impact, absent any change in institutional rules.
- An implicit treatment of stable parameters as variables, or of variables as stable.