

The Overton Window is Broken

The Overton Window is a simple framework for understanding what is politically possible at any given moment and how the range of options can shift through time.

I used to work at the think tank where the concept originated, from the late Joseph Overton who was the VP there just before I started. I found it useful and valuable, and built much of my understanding of social change and the direction of my life and career around it. (Here's a talk I gave explaining this process.) It had amazing explanatory power.

Now, it's broken.

I don't mean the window has shifted. I mean the entire framework of a continuum of political possibility from total freedom to total tyranny that shifts, shrinks, or expands is broken. It doesn't explain the current world or where it might go.

I had no idea this was even possible, but it seems to me to be the case. Anything and nothing are politically possible at the same time. There is no boundary, no framework, no popular principles to shift. There is case by case chaos, openness to everything and nothing.

It happened fast. Within a few weeks, legible political paradigms disappeared.

It is possible the window has just shifted in the extreme, allowing for total tyranny. Or expanded to include a broad range that ends in total tyranny. But it feels less legible than that. It feels like there is no window at all. I suspect that in this chaos, anything is within the realm of possibility.

A good way to judge what's in the window is to ask, "Could a political figure talk about this idea without losing election". It doesn't have to be a passable policy, just one that you're allowed to talk about. For example, for most of my life, any politician who even talked about the idea of slavery as something worth considering would lose election. Or someone who talked about ending all public schools would lose election. The window didn't extend that far towards tyranny in the first instance, or freedom in the second.

But right now, it feels like almost anyone could mention almost any idea and I'm not sure it would be too far from whatever is now normal to eliminate them from political discourse. I wouldn't be surprised to see calls to make the income tax 100%. Or calls to eliminate it altogether. There are already states that have moved to totalitarianism, with 24/7 house arrest and tanks in the streets. Maybe some will cease government operations altogether.

I have no idea. No framework. No clear picture of a window or its shifting or direction.

The Overton Window of a few weeks ago seems to have exploded. There's no legible direction. I have no idea what comes next.