

How -isms Evolve, Compete, and Transform: The Dynamics of Ideological Change

Executive Summary

-isms are not static. They emerge from specific historical conditions, evolve in response to new evidence and changing contexts, compete with rival frameworks for the allegiance of movements and publics, fracture and recombine, expand and contract. Understanding the dynamics of ideological change is essential for NGO practitioners who want to navigate the ideological landscape of their field strategically — who want to contribute to the evolution of beneficial -isms rather than being passively shaped by forces they do not understand.

The history of social change is, in significant part, a history of ideological change: the transformation of the conditions under which certain ideas about justice, rights, and responsibility become thinkable, speakable, and eventually inevitable — what has been called the Overton window, or the window of acceptable discourse. Moving the window — expanding what is politically thinkable, what is morally sayable, what is institutionally possible — is one of the most important things a social change organization can do. And doing it requires understanding how -isms evolve.

This guide examines the dynamics of ideological change across the lifespan of a social movement: how -isms emerge from diagnosis and dissent, how they develop and differentiate, how they compete with rival frameworks, how they achieve cultural and institutional traction, and how they eventually either transform society or are absorbed, co-opted, or superseded. It draws on the history of movements including abolitionism, feminism, environmentalism, and the animal advocacy movement to illustrate the general dynamics with specific examples.

Evidence Table

Key Finding	Strength	NGO Implications
New -isms typically emerge from a combination of new moral insight, changing material conditions, and the development of a diagnostic vocabulary that makes previously invisible wrongs visible.	High (social movement history)	The emergence of new -isms is not accidental — it is facilitated by specific conditions that organizations can help create.
-isms typically differentiate over time into reform and radical wings — the reform wing seeking change within existing institutions, the radical wing seeking more fundamental transformation.	High (movement sociology)	This differentiation is predictable and can be managed strategically rather than experienced as organizational crisis.

Key Finding	Strength	NGO Implications
Dominant -isms face persistent threats of co-optation — the absorption of surface features by mainstream institutions in ways that neutralize the deeper challenge.	High (movement sociology and critical theory)	Co-optation awareness is a strategic necessity. Organizations must actively distinguish between genuine adoption of their doctrine and superficial accommodation.
-Isms that successfully frame their claims in terms of existing, widely-shared values (liberty, fairness, compassion) diffuse more rapidly than those that require audiences to adopt entirely new value frameworks.	High (framing research)	Strategic framing that connects new moral claims to existing values is a critical diffusion tool.
The speed of ideological change has accelerated significantly with digital communication — new -isms can achieve rapid mass awareness but also face more rapid counter-mobilization.	Moderate (digital media and social movement research, 2015–24)	Digital speed requires faster strategic response and more robust ideological infrastructure.
Movements whose -isms achieve cultural traction (in art, media, education, and language) before policy traction tend to produce more durable change than those that win policy victories without cultural shift.	High (social change history)	Cultural -ism building is as strategically important as policy advocacy.

Step-by-Step Framework

Step 1: Understand How -Isms Emerge

Every significant -ism began as a minority view — a claim about rights, justice, or moral consideration that was incomprehensible or actively rejected by the mainstream. Understanding how -isms emerge helps organizations think about how to accelerate the emergence of new moral frameworks.

The three conditions for -ism emergence:

- 1. A new or sharpened moral insight:** Something — a philosophical argument, a scientific discovery, a personal encounter, a work of art — makes visible a wrong that was previously invisible or normalized. Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) is one of the most documented examples: a philosophical argument that made the moral status of animals newly legible to a generation of readers who had not previously considered the question. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is another: not an argument but a narrative that made the humanity of enslaved people viscerally present to readers who had rationalized their dehumanization.
- 2. Changing material conditions:** New material conditions — economic shifts, technological changes, environmental crises, demographic transitions — create new experiences of injustice or new possibilities for imagining different arrangements. The industrial factory farming system created the material conditions for the modern animal welfare and animal rights movements: the scale and visibility of farmed animal suffering produced by industrialized

production systems made a level of moral attention possible that was not available to pre-industrial societies.

3. A diagnostic vocabulary: The emergence of new language — new terms, new concepts, new frames — is both a symptom and a cause of -ism development. When "speciesism" (Singer, 1975) entered the vocabulary of animal advocates, it changed what was thinkable and speakable about the human-animal relationship. When "factory farming" became a widely understood descriptor, it changed how mainstream audiences could think about food production. Diagnostic vocabulary is an -ism's infrastructure: it enables the communication of shared understanding and the recognition of shared purpose among movement participants.

Step 2: Understand the Lifespan of an -Ism

Social movement scholars have described the characteristic lifespan of -isms through various stage models. A simplified version:

Stage 1 — Emergence: A new moral insight is articulated, a diagnostic vocabulary begins to develop, a small community of believers forms. The -ism is a minority view, often dismissed or ridiculed by mainstream institutions. Organizational forms are typically informal: study groups, small publications, grassroots networks.

Stage 2 — Development and differentiation: The -ism develops intellectually (more sophisticated arguments, more extensive diagnostic vocabulary, engagement with counterarguments) and organizationally (the founding of formal organizations, the development of professional advocacy). It begins to differentiate: reform-oriented and more radical wings emerge, with different diagnoses, different theories of change, and different organizational strategies.

Stage 3 — Contestation and competition: The -ism achieves enough salience that it generates active counter-mobilization — from institutions and interests that the -ism challenges, from rival -isms that offer alternative diagnoses, and from internal critics who believe the movement has lost its way. This is the phase of most intense ideological competition.

Stage 4 — Traction and institutionalization: The -ism achieves cultural and/or institutional traction: its key claims are adopted by mainstream institutions (legislatures, corporations, media, educational institutions), its vocabulary becomes widely used, its moral claims become part of the common sense of at least a significant portion of the population. This is also the phase of greatest co-optation risk.

Stage 5 — Transformation, absorption, or supersession: In the longer run, -isms either transform the institutions and practices they challenged (rare), are absorbed by mainstream institutions in watered-down form (common), or are superseded by more radical successor -isms that find the institutionalized version insufficient (also common). Most successful -isms follow a path of partial institutionalization combined with continued challenge from more radical successor movements.

Step 3: Understand Ideological Competition

No -ism operates in a vacuum. Every significant -ism competes with rival frameworks for the allegiance of potential recruits, the attention of mainstream institutions, and the definition of what the problem is and how it should be addressed. Understanding ideological competition is essential for strategic positioning.

Types of ideological competition:

Diagnostic competition: Different -isms offer different accounts of what the problem is and what causes it. In the food system space, for example, animal welfare advocates, food justice advocates, environmental advocates, and public health advocates all have different diagnoses of what is wrong with the food system — and those diagnoses have different implications for strategy and priority.

Theory of change competition: Even -isms with similar diagnoses often compete over theory of change: is the most effective path to change corporate engagement, consumer behavior change, policy reform, or cultural transformation? This competition produces significant strategic disagreements within movements.

Moral community competition: -isms compete for the allegiance of potential recruits — particularly at moments of heightened moral salience, when individuals are newly motivated to act on a moral concern and are choosing which movement to join and which -ism to adopt.

Strategic responses to ideological competition:

- Develop a clear account of what your -ism offers that others do not — not to dismiss rival frameworks but to articulate your distinctive contribution.
- Identify areas of genuine convergence with rival -isms and build strategic alliances on that basis.
- Avoid the temptation to fight the ideological battles of the 1980s in the 2020s: ideological landscapes evolve, and the frameworks that were most in tension twenty years ago may be increasingly convergent today.

Step 4: Recognize and Resist Co-Optation

Co-optation — the absorption of an -ism's surface features by mainstream institutions in ways that neutralize its deeper challenge — is one of the most persistent strategic threats facing successful social movements. Recognizing co-optation is the first step toward resisting it.

Patterns of co-optation:

Vocabulary without substance: The language of the -ism is adopted (sustainability, welfare, justice, compassion) while the practices that the -ism was developed to challenge continue unchanged. "Humane washing" in the animal welfare context is a clear example: products and companies adopt welfare language and certification without making the substantive changes to animal treatment that the -ism demands.

Reform without transformation: The most visible and most tractable aspects of the problem are addressed (improving conditions in the most extreme cases) while the structural conditions that produce the problem remain untouched. This is the characteristic pattern of reform co-optation: the -ism achieves real but limited changes that reduce the urgency of more fundamental transformation.

Institutionalization of the least threatening elements: As -isms achieve mainstream acceptance, the elements most threatening to existing power structures tend to be excluded from institutional adoption while more accommodating elements are embraced. The institutionalization of "sustainability" in corporate practice has often proceeded by prioritizing efficiency and cost reduction (which benefit corporations) while deprioritizing the structural challenges to growth and consumption that radical environmentalism demands.

Resisting co-optation:

- Maintain clear, measurable criteria for what genuine adoption of your -ism's demands looks like — and hold institutions accountable to those criteria, not to their own definitions.
- Distinguish publicly and consistently between genuine progress and superficial accommodation.
- Sustain the more radical elements of your -ism even as more modest versions achieve institutional acceptance — the radical wing of a movement creates the political space for the reform wing to succeed.

Step 5: Contribute to Overton Window Movement

The Overton window describes the range of ideas that are considered acceptable in mainstream public discourse at any given time. Moving the window — expanding what is politically thinkable, what is morally sayable, what is institutionally possible — is one of the most important long-term strategic contributions a social change organization can make.

How -isms move the Overton window:

Articulation of previously unspoken moral claims: When a movement articulates a moral claim that was previously unspoken — "animals deserve moral consideration," "the climate system is in crisis," "food production workers deserve living wages" — it introduces a new item into public discourse. Even if the claim is initially rejected, its articulation begins a process of normalization.

Narrative and cultural production: Stories, art, film, and narrative journalism that embody -ism values reach audiences that abstract argument cannot. The visual documentation of factory farming conditions, the narrative representation of animal cognition and sentience, the cultural celebration of plant-based cuisine — all contribute to the normalization of animal welfare concerns in mainstream culture.

Trusted messenger strategy: New moral claims are more readily accepted when they come from trusted sources. The endorsement of animal welfare science by mainstream scientific institutions, the adoption of plant-based menu options by prestigious restaurants, and the

investment in alternative proteins by major food companies all shift what is considered mainstream and normal.

Radical flank effects: More radical expressions of an -ism — which may initially be rejected or ridiculed — shift the Overton window by making more moderate positions seem comparatively reasonable. The animal rights movement's more radical claims have arguably made animal welfare reforms easier to achieve by shifting the baseline of what is considered an acceptable middle ground.

Step 6: Build for the Long Arc

The most important social transformations — abolitionism, women's suffrage, civil rights, environmental protection — took decades or generations to achieve. NGO practitioners working within -isms need the strategic patience to work at multiple time horizons simultaneously: generating near-term wins that build movement momentum and demonstrate achievability, while also investing in the long-arc work of ideological development, cultural change, and institutional transformation.

Long-arc investments:

- Supporting the intellectual development of your -ism: commissioning and disseminating research, supporting scholarship, developing the diagnostic vocabulary and normative vision.
- Cultural and narrative production: investing in the stories, art, and cultural representations that normalize -ism values and make them emotionally resonant.
- Building the pipeline of movement leaders and practitioners: supporting the education and development of the next generation of -ism advocates.
- Maintaining the radical flank: supporting, or at least not undermining, the more radical expressions of your -ism that shift the window even as your organization focuses on achievable near-term change.
- Documenting and learning from movement history: understanding what worked and what did not in previous phases of -ism development.

Tools and Templates

-Ism Lifecycle Assessment: A diagnostic tool for assessing where your -ism currently sits in its lifecycle: emergence indicators | development and differentiation markers | contestation and competition patterns | traction and institutionalization evidence | co-optation risk assessment.

Ideological Competition Map: A structured exercise for mapping the major competing -isms in your field: each framework | its diagnosis | its theory of change | its moral community | areas of convergence with your -ism | areas of divergence | strategic implications.

Co-Optation Detection Checklist: A quarterly assessment: Is the language of our -ism being adopted without the substance? Are the most challenging elements of our doctrine being

excluded from institutional adoption? Are our criteria for genuine progress being respected, or are superficial accommodations being presented as substantive change?

Overton Window Mapping: A facilitated exercise for mapping the current Overton window in your issue area: what is currently mainstream | what is currently considered radical | what was previously unthinkable but is now mainstream | what could realistically move from radical to mainstream in 5–10 years.

Case Vignettes

Case Vignette 1: Ideological Differentiation — Reform and Transformation in Animal Advocacy

The modern animal advocacy movement has followed the classic -ism pattern of differentiation into reform and transformative wings. The welfare reform wing (represented by organizations like the Humane Society of the United States, Compassion in World Farming, and The Humane League) focuses on improving conditions for farmed animals within existing production systems — campaigning for cage-free eggs, better stunning standards, faster growth breed transitions, and improved slaughter practices. The abolitionist wing (influenced by the philosophy of Gary Francione and represented by various vegan advocacy organizations) argues that welfare reform legitimizes and extends animal exploitation rather than challenging it, and that only veganism — the complete elimination of animal product consumption — is an ethically coherent response to the injustice of animal exploitation.

This differentiation has produced decades of movement tension — and significant strategic debate about which approach is more effective. The empirical evidence, where it exists, tends to favor the welfare reform approach on near-term impact metrics (number of animals whose conditions improved per dollar invested). The abolitionist critique is stronger on long-arc arguments: does welfare reform make fundamental transformation more or less likely?

The most sophisticated practitioners in the movement have moved beyond this framing toward a strategic pluralism: recognizing that both approaches may be necessary at different phases of movement development, and that the radical wing creates Overton window space that makes the reform wing's work achievable.

Key lessons: (1) Reform/transformation differentiation is predictable and not inherently dysfunctional. (2) The strategic relationship between wings is more important than their ideological relationship — how do they enable and constrain each other? (3) Empirical evidence can inform the debate but cannot resolve it, because the disagreement is partly about time horizons and partly about values.

Case Vignette 2: Co-Optation in Practice — "Sustainability" and the Limits of Corporate Adoption

The sustainability -ism that emerged from the environmental movement of the 1970s has achieved remarkable institutional penetration — virtually every major corporation now has a sustainability program, a sustainability officer, and a sustainability report. But the content of mainstream corporate sustainability has, in most cases, diverged significantly from the original -ism's diagnostic and normative content.

The original environmentalist diagnosis — that the economic growth imperative is fundamentally incompatible with ecological sustainability — has been almost entirely excluded from corporate sustainability adoption. What has been adopted instead is a version of sustainability focused on efficiency (reducing waste, reducing energy consumption per unit of output) and risk management (identifying climate-related business risks) — a version that is compatible with continued growth and continued shareholder value maximization.

The result is an -ism that has achieved extraordinary surface penetration while the core challenge — to the growth imperative, to the externalization of ecological costs, to the fundamental incompatibility of infinite growth on a finite planet — remains as unaddressed in mainstream institutional life as it was before "sustainability" became a corporate buzzword.

The lesson for animal advocates is clear: the adoption of "welfare" language by corporations and food producers does not automatically indicate genuine adoption of the welfare -ism's demands. Maintaining clear, measurable criteria for what genuine welfare improvement looks like — and insisting on those criteria rather than accepting vocabulary adoption as progress — is the essential counter-co-optation practice.

Key lessons: (1) Co-optation is most dangerous precisely when an -ism is most successful — when its language is everywhere but its substance is nowhere. (2) Maintaining and enforcing clear, measurable standards is the practical tool for resisting co-optation. (3) The radical wing of a movement plays an essential role in keeping the co-optation problem visible — even when its demands are not immediately achievable.

Metrics and KPIs

Metric / KPI	What It Measures	How to Measure
Overton window position (annual)	Mainstream acceptability of -ism claims	Media analysis, polling data
Co-optation detection score	Substance vs. surface adoption	Co-optation detection checklist
Ideological differentiation health	Reform/transformation balance	Movement mapping exercise
Vocabulary penetration	-ism lexicon diffusion	Media monitoring
Cultural production investment	Long-arc cultural building	Organizational investment tracking
Radical flank health	Transformative wing sustainability	Movement ecosystem assessment

Risks and Mitigations

Risk: Becoming so focused on co-optation risks that genuine progress is dismissed as insufficient.

Mitigation: Develop clear, pre-agreed criteria for what constitutes genuine progress vs. superficial accommodation. Apply those criteria consistently — celebrating genuine progress while naming superficial accommodation for what it is.

Risk: Reform/transformation tension within a movement consuming energy that could be directed toward external change.

Mitigation: Invest in deliberate inter-wing dialogue. Develop shared frameworks for assessing the strategic relationship between reform and transformation approaches rather than relitigating the underlying ideological disagreement repeatedly.

Risk: Long-arc investments being deprioritized in favor of near-term wins under funder and organizational pressure.

Mitigation: Protect a proportion of organizational capacity for long-arc work regardless of near-term performance pressure. Make the case to funders for long-arc investment on strategic grounds.

Implementation Checklist

- -Ism lifecycle stage assessed for your primary -ism
- Ideological competition map completed for your field
- Co-optation risk assessment conducted: where is your -ism's language being adopted without substance?
- Overton window map developed: current mainstream, current radical, 5-10 year realistic shift
- Long-arc investment plan developed: intellectual, cultural, pipeline, documentation
- Reform/transformation relationship assessed: how do the wings of your movement enable and constrain each other?

Glossary

Co-Optation: The absorption of an -ism's surface features (vocabulary, aesthetics, moderate claims) by mainstream institutions in ways that neutralize the deeper challenge the -ism poses.

Ideological Competition: The contest between rival -isms for the allegiance of potential recruits, the attention of mainstream institutions, and the definition of what the problem is and how it should be solved.

Overton Window: The range of ideas considered acceptable in mainstream public discourse at a given time. Moving the window is one of the most important long-arc contributions a social change organization can make.

Radical Flank Effect: The phenomenon whereby the more radical expressions of an -ism shift the Overton window, making more moderate positions seem comparatively reasonable and achievable.

Reform Wing: The wing of a movement focused on achieving improvements within existing institutions and systems. Typically associated with measurable near-term impact but criticized for legitimizing existing structures.

Transformative / Abolitionist Wing: The wing of a movement focused on more fundamental systemic change. Typically associated with long-arc impact and radical flank effects but criticized for insufficient near-term measurability.

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