

FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION: STAGES OF CHANGE

You may hear people say their goals or objectives are to “raise awareness” or “start a conversation.” But **is awareness or a conversation the outcome you’re really after?**

Imagine you’re trying to “raise awareness” about the importance of same-day voter registration, as you live in a state where that is not an option. Guess what? You’re successful! Everyone in your state is now aware about the importance of same-day voter registration. Would that be enough? If everyone is aware, but no laws have been changed, no high-opportunity voters find it easier to cast their ballot, no more folks in your community get to vote — have you actually reached your goal?

We can do more. And if you’re going to spend your time, energy, and resources, we have to do more. **Ask for actions through your tactics**, like: engaging public officials, getting five other people to do the same, participating in one of your pro-same day voter registration events, or organizing their own, just to name a few.

When it comes to setting objectives, one of the common problems we’ve seen activists struggle with is **moving beyond “raising awareness”** on an issue. **The impetus behind raising awareness is good!** People need to be aware of a problem and feel something about it before they can act upon it. But this last part is key: **the ultimate aim of changing people’s hearts and minds is to get them to *act* a different way.**

In fact, **raising awareness without directing people towards action can do real harm.** Imagine we educate a whole neighborhood about gerrymandering in their community. They learn why it happens, the harms it causes, how it’s perpetuated, and so on. But we stop there, without a way to take action. What we’re then telling people is: this is how the system is rigged and there’s essentially nothing you can do. What else is there to do but shrug off the disappointment, dismiss the whole thing as hopeless, and disengage from politics even more?

Instead, we can explore the positive impact that fair political maps would have on communities and their lives — and most importantly, we can give our audiences concrete and meaningful actions they can take to move their community toward fairly drawn maps.



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THE STEPS BETWEEN AWARENESS AND ACTION

Studies show that **behavior change happens in a series of steps**. For example, for someone to develop a daily meditation practice, they need to go through a process of hearing about and understanding what meditation is and how it could work in their life. They then need to build skills to meditate regularly, have their choices reinforced by their peers, see meaningful results, and integrate the change into their everyday life. Similarly, helping a person go from joining a single protest, to voting in a presidential election, to committing to vote in next year's local elections, to volunteering regularly with a voting organization, to identifying themselves as a voting champion, also involves moving through these kinds of steps.

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Let's say someone else on your team said their goal was to **raise awareness** about the next election among non-voters. You would, of course, patiently work with this person to turn their suggestion into a **behavioral outcome** — the action you want to see your audience do — and then design a strong, specific objective like so:

In our upcoming election, 100 people from House District 9, who are registered to vote but have not voted in the last 3 elections, vote.

We know, for sure, that telling those 100 people, “You should vote!” will not result in those 100 people voting. **These high-potential voters can't leap from awareness about the election to taking action by voting.** They go through a process. As a voting advocate, you've already seen people move through those steps, but we're going to talk about them in detail so we can identify each and plan more effective campaigns.

Researchers James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente's “**Stages of Change Theory**” is widely used in public health and psychology to shed light on **how people make positive changes**. The model helps identify where people are in the process and how to provide support to move them through. We'll use Stages of Change Theory with our objective above, but, as you'll see, the model pushes us even beyond a change in behavior (voting in the next election) toward lasting change in the person (becoming a life-long voter).

The stages are:

1) Pre-contemplation. If someone is in this stage, they have **no intention to take the action you want** — in this case, to vote in the next election. The reasons can vary. Some may not know an election is happening, or what's at stake, or why their vote matters. Others may be informed but feel unmotivated or resistant based on past experiences. In order to move this person to the next step, we need to:



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- Capture our audience's attention,
- Pique their interest and evoke emotional connection, and
- Show the larger impact of their action (or inaction).

2) Contemplation. A person in this stage is **considering** voting in the foreseeable future — though they may hover in this phase and consider it for much longer before finally acting. They may weigh benefits and costs. As their perceptions of those change, their calculation may as well. Then an openness to voting may emerge.

At this stage you can:

- Help our audience understand the benefits and costs of the action,
- Change the real or perceived benefits and costs of the action, and/or
- Encourage our audience to reflect on the disconnect between their self-image and their actions.

3) Preparation. The decision to act is made and planning begins — usually about 30 days from the action itself. Here the person commits to the action: registering to vote or signing a pledge. They may also research the candidates and measures on the ballot, figure out the date and time they'll vote, plan how they'll get to the polls, and more. You can help them in their preparation in lots of ways:

- Create various smaller commitment tactics (e.g., adding a note about Election Day to their calendar) to help move them toward further preparation.
- Provide information around polling sites, voting hours, and/or issue and candidate voting guides.
- Offer resources — smaller things like a sticker or phone call to remind them to vote, or larger efforts like rides to the polls.

4) Action. The person votes! This may be a one-off event, or they may vote in elections for years while still feeling uncommitted about voting in every election. **But, you've achieved your immediate objective of the action**, so now it's about moving into the next stage.

5) Maintenance. In maintenance, voting becomes part of the person's routine. They are committed to voting and do so every Election Day. Our efforts are made to prevent them from stepping backwards to previous stages. This is where our short-term efforts can transform into lasting results. A mistake made too often is considering the person as a vote and abandoning that person once they've voted. Instead, we want to **support that behavior** and help them take on the identity of a voter. This takes effort and may last months or years. Some ways to do this are:

- Develop ways to **reward or reinforce** the behavior — for example, an invite to an Election Day party.



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- Provide a **community and helpful relationships** that support the behavior.
- Offer **opportunities for continued engagement** between elections — attending meetings with recently elected officials, participating in other advocacy campaigns, or organizing community events that foster civic participation.

6) Identity. The person becomes a consistent voter. They would never dream of not voting. They don't need persuading and require minimal support, if any. You can cultivate a feeling of identity in a variety of ways such as:

- **Provide opportunities for them to expand their role**, like public speaking, leadership, or training in advocacy skills to help the person feel more empowered and able to help others.
- **Celebrate milestones** like voting in a certain number of elections.

Together the stages reveal key insights:

- While we may move someone to action in one election year, **Stages of Change Theory points us beyond a solitary action toward *sustained* transformation that generally happens over longer time periods.**
- **At each stage we can't expect a 100% success rate in moving people to the next stage. This means your audience naturally gets smaller as you progress.** Therefore, starting with a large audience and ending with a significantly smaller one is not a failure, but rather it's an expectation and inherent challenge of changing behavior.
- **Each stage requires the audience to have completed those that came before it.** We can't skip ahead. However, we can strategically focus on a specific stage or stages that would have the most impact. As we evaluate our tactic ideas we can ask: which stage is our primary audience within now? Which tactic will move the most people through a stage? Which will have the most meaningful impact on an audience in one of the stages?

Admittedly, all this might seem a bit dry and systematic. It's true: these are the nuts and bolts of campaigning. However, while you need to move people through these stages, the materials and methods you use allow plenty of latitude for creative approaches! **The importance of creativity lies not in the structure but in how you move people through it.**

Not everyone who encounters your action will be at the same stage, so **having multiple layers of information and options for involvement is key.** For just one example, your Election Day party could celebrate people who voted — and it can also have voter registration forms on hand for any non-voter who happens to stumble in and wants to join the party.

