

# **The Reverse Overton Process: The Shift In Acceptability**

Abdulrahman T. Sarsour

Cary High School

*abdulrahman.sarsour@gmail.com*

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### **Introduction**

Election season brings in promises from each candidate. In the 2020 election cycle, many progressive ideas such as free college and universal healthcare have come to the forefront of the advocated policies. A mere 30 years prior, these policies would be seen as too radical to even be brought up while running for president of the United States (Marsh, 2016). Yet as time continues and new ideas shift into the realm of possibility, what defines “controversial” has shifted as well. How the overall society defines what is acceptable and what is controversial is constantly changing and more so, evolving. As U.S Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) proposed the Green New Deal, a revolutionary shift in opinion in regards to United States environmental policy, the bill lacked total support even on her side of the political aisle (Tomasky, 2019). Such a proposal was unprecedented and treated as such. Backlash to the bill included downright opposition, with force and prowess (Tomasky, 2019). The Overton Window of Political Possibilities, as outlined by the late Joseph Overton of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, works to address how much of the opinions that are presented on the forefront of protests and arguments actually work to eventually become policies that are passed in a legislative body (2012).

The Overton Window addresses a specific path that ideas must follow, beginning at a direct indifference to the proposal of an idea to the final phases of acceptance and implementation into policy (Mackinac Center, 2012). Yet oftentimes, a policy is implemented and then repealed. The 18th Amendment is a prime example of such an instance. It was implemented as policy but fell out of public favor, which can be attributable to its repeal. The

Overton Window addresses public policy in the forward motion but ultimately falls short in addressing the policies that fall out of public discourse.

The Truman Doctrine, implemented in post World War 2 United States, created an outline of American foreign policy—to rid the west of communist ideals in favor of the democratic governments. The United States, a world superpower after the events of WW2, was expected to be the global police force that ensured these democratic ideals in every possible nation. However, this course of action eventually fell out of public favor, despite the Truman Doctrine successfully passing the stages of the Overton Window. It was popular but eventually saw a form of rejection. The Reagan Doctrine arrived and shifted United States foreign policy from what had once been the popular norm for almost 40 years (Schorr, 2018).

The reversal of the Truman Doctrine is not an isolated incident in which a popular policy, which arrived as policy by fulfilling the expectations of the Overton Window, became unfavorable, radical, or even outright rejected. Prohibition was a result of years of temperance movements and over speculation of the impact of alcohol on the United States economy (Shrad, 2020). When the 18th Amendment was passed, it had large scale political and public support. After implementation, the 18th Amendment lost its popularity that was essential to make the amendment successful. Eventually, the 18th Amendment was repealed with the 21st Amendment, effectively bringing an end to the prohibition era. Yet, no existing research outlines and identifies the existence of a reverse Overton Process—a process which sees a once popular idea or policy growing into distaste and displeasure.

## Literature Review



## Political Progression of Ideas

- Unthinkable
- Radical
- Acceptable
- Sensible
- Popular
- Policy

Labels by Josh Trevino

The Overton Window was first developed in the late 1990s by Joseph Overton, a think tank worker at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy (Russell, 2006). This theory has been used to teach think tank workers and the candidates that they advise in regards to which policies should be advocated for. The path of the opinions have been given many different names, but the most acknowledged titles are those that former George W. Bush administration staff member, Josh Trevino, assigned (Mackinac Center, 2012).

In order to fully understand the forward progression of the Overton Window, the evolution of the War on Drugs works as a primary example. The War on Drugs in of itself, is a unique quagmire. The implementation of the War on Drugs as well as the policies which structurally dismantled the War on Drugs forwardly progressed through the Overton Window.

The rise of hippie counterculture, which led to a rapid increase in marijuana usage, encouraged the United States government to implement anti-drug specific policies as well as tougher enforcement (McCoy, 2019). However, this federal distaste did not occur overnight (Stanford University).

The first argument that arose while attempting to limit the drugs on the street was that such a feat would be impossible, and by means of virtue, unthinkable (Cassie, 2018). This identifies the first step of the forward progression of the Overton Window—a movement being **unthinkable**, lacking statistically significant support or true rationale in public opinion. Opponents to the initial War on Drugs and the momentum it was slowly gaining argued that it was too radical of a shift from existing current U.S policies (New York Times, 1988). Once again, the argument brought about the idea that anything that War On Drugs did would be impossible to individually implement objectively (Chivers, 2020). Furthermore, the mass implementation of any policy that could possibly intrude on the privacy and rights of the American citizens was largely regarded as **radical**, a decision or position that would be accepted by a small minority of the population due to existing dissidence.

The continuation of perpetual drug usage in the United States and the speeches made by the likes of President Nixon eventually found solace within a certain section of the population, gaining widespread support (New York Times, 2018). This represents the eventual shift to acceptability or rather, the **acceptable** phase, where the idea of radical change develops a strong enough foothold in current political discourse to be considered as a legitimate decision (Lehman, 2010). This formation of a legitimate decision also means that it begins to gain political

acceptability amongst candidates who are running for office, as did the War on Drugs (Vulliamy, 2011).

The War on Drugs achieved reaching the **sensible** phase, the phase in which the average member of society understands the pros and cons of a policy and decides that there are more benefits than consequences, quickly due to the tangibility of rampant drug use in the United States. As drug use increased, especially within low income communities, the sensible solution was to punish drug use and distribution (Cassie, 2018).

Drug use began to overflow from the streets of low income communities to the middle class, predominantly white communities, which is where extensive anti-drug laws became **popular**, the phase in which public political discourse has earned traction on a legislative scale while also becoming a political possibility in implemented law. (Cassie, 2018). The fear that drugs such as marijuana could “corrupt” the youth of an up-and-coming age group led these communities to canvas against drugs. Special campaigns gained popularity and eventually, once racial takes on the war on drugs were the most agreed upon and important (May, Kulman, 2015).

The presidential election of 1980 was meant to provide a new answer to the question, “who will guide us through a new decade?” The answer: former actor turned politician Ronald Reagan. Reagan followed in the formerly mentioned Richard Nixon’s footsteps and decided that drugs deserved to be punishable in a much harsher light. This idea gained legislative acceptance and turned into **policy**, the phase in which a popular idea passes through the appropriate legislative chambers to become enforceable law, followed with the stamp of approval of Reagan. The war on drugs was in full effect, with its downsides being fully realized decades later (Chivers, 2020).

The first person to sound the alarm was Kurt Schmoke, who spoke against a politically acceptable ideal that he believed should be reversed. Ideas are often adopted by a political party or candidate by a simple weighted analysis—a perceived benefit leads to an eventual adoption of an ideal (Mackinac Center, 2012). However, a candidate, like Schmoke, may adopt an ideal that appears best for the overall society but does not yet fit the requirements of the current window of acceptable ideals. This was Schmoke's path of politics. The first African American mayor of Baltimore called the War on Drugs campaign a failure for unfairly targeting the black community as well as arguing for decriminalization of illegal drugs (Ranzini, 2016).

Very often, it is the political candidates who push for a shift in the Overton Window, but not all succeed, like Schmoke. However, where existing research lacks is how the people who are represented by these elected officials have shifted the Overton Window, and more so, how the public responded to ideals that are no longer in their realm of acceptability. Do these once accepted ideals simply follow along a reverse path of the Overton Window? Do existing policies have to cause a downturn in order to be seen as radical? Although great questions, they simply would not account for the fact that ideals arrive on the scene as policy by following the steps of the Overton Window, which is what previous research has continually overlooked. The Overton Window has primarily been studied in the forward motion, and no existing research accounts for policies that have fallen out of public discourse. This complete under-evaluation of the Reverse Overton Process (where policies shift to being seen as too radical for acceptability) has guided me to a question: based off the development of political ideals and the Overton Window, what is the specific steps by which once accepted policies are eventually rejected and then viewed as overly radical for acceptable policy? Based on the literature review, it is hypothesized that the

Reverse Overton Process will follow the direct reverse path of the forward Overton Process. This means that each historical event will begin as a policy, eventually lose popularity, become less sensible while losing acceptability, and eventually become too radical for public discourse. The final step that I believe will be observed is the digression to a completely unthinkable idea, have it be in logical, moral, or economic dissidence.

### **Methodology**

As discussed in the literature review, previous research has continuously failed to properly address the full effect of the Reverse Overton Process. To address this, two different historical occurrences have been selected to identify in reverse. Due to the Overton Window being a theory developed in the United States, all occurrences that have been selected are United States based policies or ideals. The two events that have been selected are the reversal of prohibition and the diplomatic reversal from the Truman Doctrine.

For sake of description and analysis, my results will be sectioned in two: “preliminary results and analysis” as well as a “final analysis” section. The former will simply be a description of the historical events that unfolded during the time frame of each selected policy. Such a description will include major catalysts in the ultimate reversal of a policy. The latter will be an attempt to link the major catalysts recognized in the preliminary analysis and the corresponding stage in the hypothesized Reverse Overton Process.

Prohibition has been selected due to the occurrence of an actual policy, the 18th Amendment. The enactment of prohibition is one of the most well known American blunders because of the backlash that immediately arose and because of how much alcohol has grown into a staple in American culture. I have provided an outline of the individual events that occurred



during the reversal of prohibition in an attempt to distinguish and recognize the individual steps of the reverse Overton processes.

The other historical event that has been selected to locate a correlation between the forward Overton process and my hypothesized reverse process is the reversal of the Truman doctrine, which was enacted post-WW2. This doctrine decreed that the United States would fight communist efforts overseas. I have proceeded to outline major events in relation to the application of the Truman Doctrine which would indicate a shift in public opinions. By means of the explanation for each stage of the Overton Process provided by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, I continued on in an attempt to decipher each step:

<b>Stage in Overton Process</b>	Definition in accordance with Mackinac Center for Public Policy and associate Josh Trevino
<b>Unthinkable</b>	Stage in which a potential policy lacks statistically significant support or true rationale in public opinion.
<b>Radical</b>	A decision or position that would be accepted by a small minority of the population due to existing social dissidence.
<b>Acceptable</b>	The idea of radical change develops a strong enough foothold in current political discourse to be considered as a legitimate decision.
<b>Sensible</b>	Stage in which the average member of society understands the pros and cons of a policy and decides that there are more benefits than consequences.
<b>Popular</b>	The phase in which public political discourse has earned traction on a legislative scale while also becoming a political possibility in implemented law.
<b>Policy</b>	The phase in which a popular idea passes through the appropriate legislative chambers to become enforceable law.

It is important to note that my intention is not to analyze the specific factors which cause a push in the Reverse Overton Process but rather simply attempting to establish the correspondence between the reverse and forward processes of the Overton Window.

### **Limitations**

The inhibiting factor for the researcher was a limited amount of data. Due to conducting a historical analysis, the researcher could only rely on information done in the given time period. In order to properly analyze the events and how each would unfold, more polling information would have proved beneficial. Furthermore, the researcher's use of the Overton Window and understanding the terms in relation to it were done in a way which required assumptions to be made. The death of Joseph Overton prior to him being able to fully conduct more research into the theory he developed meant that the researcher was expected to create definitions based on labels that were not initially established by Joseph Overton. Finally, another inhibitor the researcher faced was false information in regards to the Overton Window and its effects due to a Glen Beck novel being published years after the theory was established under the same name. Due to the publication of his novel, such a concern arises that certain definitions existed in relation to Beck's interpretation. Certain research used Beck's interpretation of the Overton Window, which varies in key areas such as the ultimate process and applicability, as opposed to the correct Joseph Overton developed theory, which is the original theory.

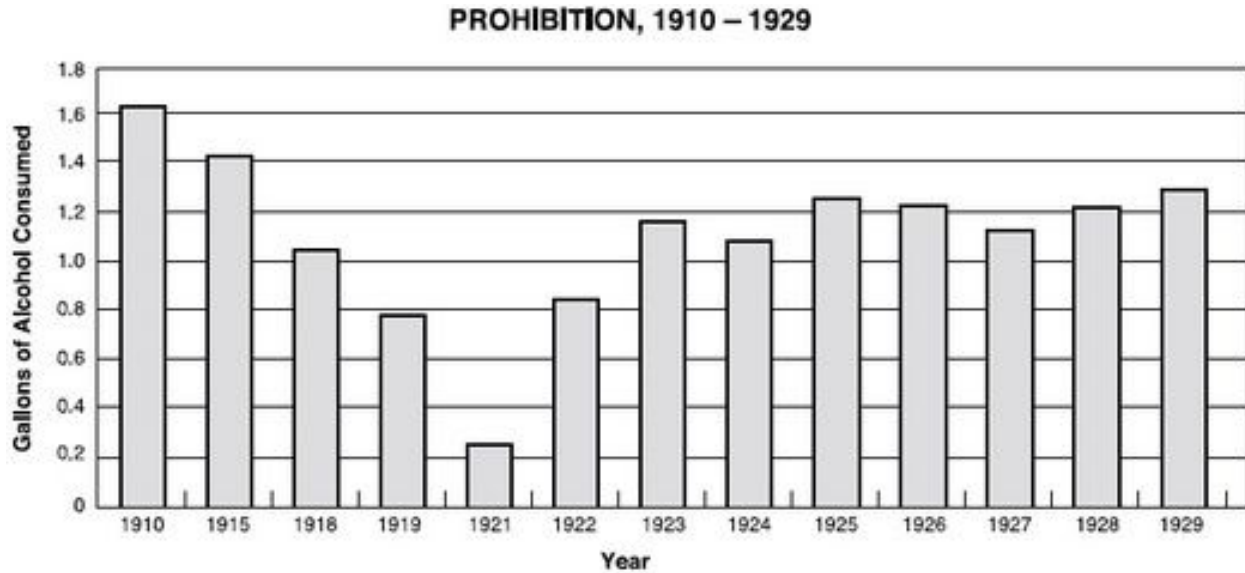
## **Preliminary Data and Analysis**

### **The Prohibition Era**

Upon the enactment of prohibition, there lacked immediate outrage (Schrad, 2020). Years of temperance movements as well as plenty of statewide prohibitions built up to the passing of the 18th Amendment in the year 1920 (Andrews, 2019). The 18th Amendment decreed the sale, production, and transport of all intoxicating liquors illegal, stopping just short of banning the physical consumption of it (Schrad, 2020). All in all, the 18th Amendment followed the forward Overton Process, thus meaning it began as a popular policy.

The effects of banning alcohol, a staple of immigrant communities like the Irish, was not immediately felt. Once again, consumption of alcohol was still permissible. Many alcohol-indulgent communities “stockpiled” on intoxicating beverages, which created a time delay—a phenomenon that occurs between the passage of a policy and the actual effects of a policy being felt (Andrews, 2019). It was only once there was an alcohol shortage in which the first signs of backlash began to manifest themselves.

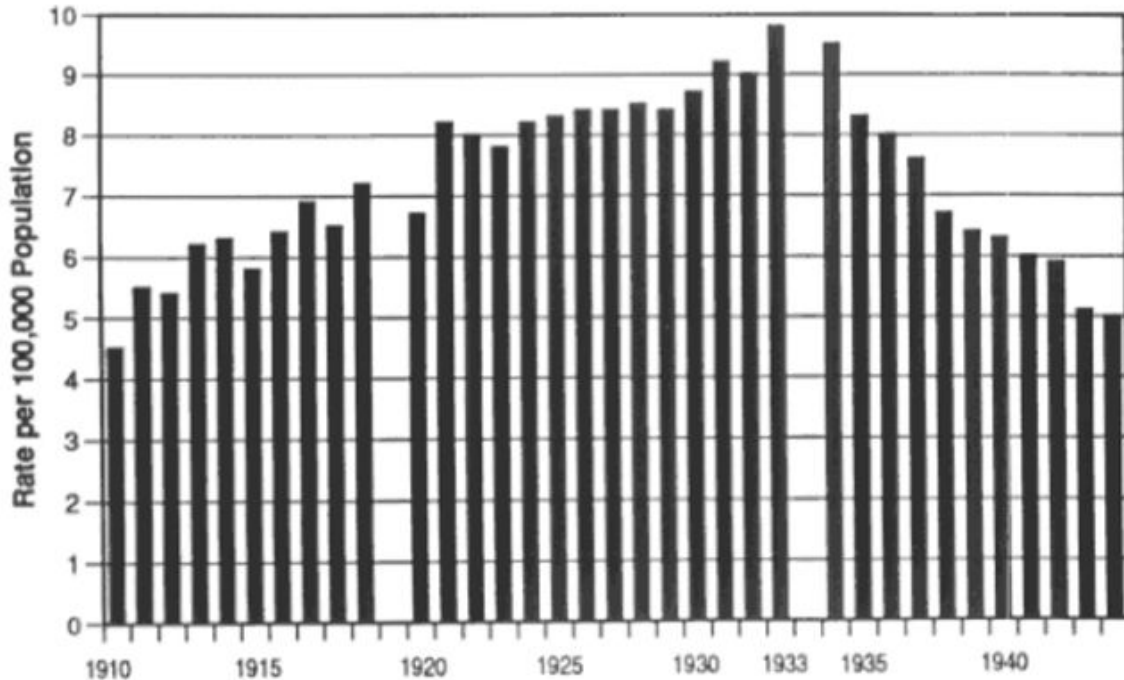
In recognition of a shortage, speakeasies were created—private pubs that were meant to be under-the-radar bars that would also produce some alcoholic beverages (Sandbrook, 2012). These private bars could exist anywhere: church basements, back rooms in restaurants, private houses, farm ranches, and even school campuses (Sandbrook, 2012). Suddenly a once great policy was being diminished in its effectiveness as people were still getting drunk (BBC).



The only major drop that occurred during prohibition was upon it being first enacted. Just a mere two years after enactment, the alcohol consumption rates in the United States were back at pre-prohibition levels (Thornton, 1991). Moreover, where there is a business, there is some group profiting. Prohibition is often credited with creating an era of mobsters and mobs in the United States (Roos, 2019). The speakeasies were quickly transformed into a prime money mill for many historical American mobsters like the notorious Al Capone (Andrews, 2019). With an estimated 2,000 million dollars worth of business lost from the once-legal brewing industry and bars landing in the hands of bootleggers, speakeasies, and mobsters, prohibition truly began to be seen as a blunder (Sandbrook, 2012). Americans felt the effect of job loss from the brewing industry, with alcohol hubs like Milwaukee and Chicago being the prime operating spots for

gangsters (Andrews, 2019).

### Homicide Rate: 1910-44



The increase in the homicide rates between the years of 1920 through 1933 (the years of prohibition) is easily attributable to the operating costs of mobsters who were thriving during the time (BBC). In an effort to prevent alcohol related crime, the opposite effect occurred. The homicide rate reached its highest in the final year of prohibition.

In early 1933, newly inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law a modification to prohibition, allowing for the sale of alcoholic beverages within a certain requirement (Thornton, 1991). The Great Depression was in full swing, reports estimated that 80% of congressmen were drinking illegally before the passage of the modification, and mobs were thriving in ways American history had never and has yet to see again (BBC).

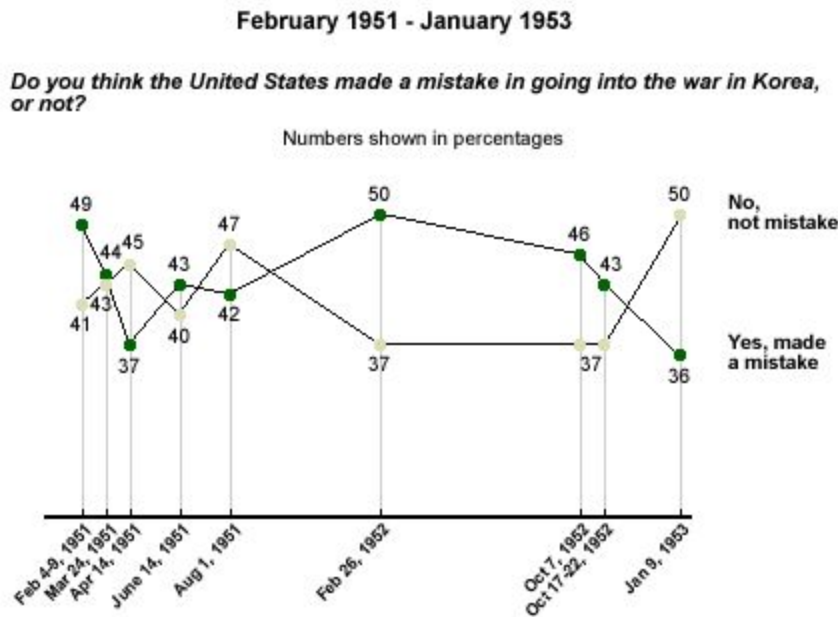
Later in 1933, the 21st Amendment was ratified, which repealed the 18th Amendment. The prohibition was officially put within the history vault of the United States and officiated as one of America's greatest blunders. Alcohol is now a staple in American society, not just certain communities. The alcohol industry employs upwards of 2.1 million Americans and accounts for 122 billion dollars in direct economic impact (ABL-USA, 2018). Moreover, other cultural staples of the United States like football and baseball have official alcohol sponsors and play in stadiums named after alcohol companies (ABL-USA, 2018),

### **The Truman Doctrine**

Following war efforts of the United States in World War 2, President Truman sought to establish a foreign policy that would match the strength that the U.S had displayed in war (Jones, 1992). What the Truman Doctrine mainly sought out to achieve was prevention of the expansion of communism and communistic ideals, specifically in Turkey and Greece (Gaddis, 1974). More specifically, the Truman Doctrine established that isolationist ideals once held by the United States was no longer an option (Sorenson, 1979).

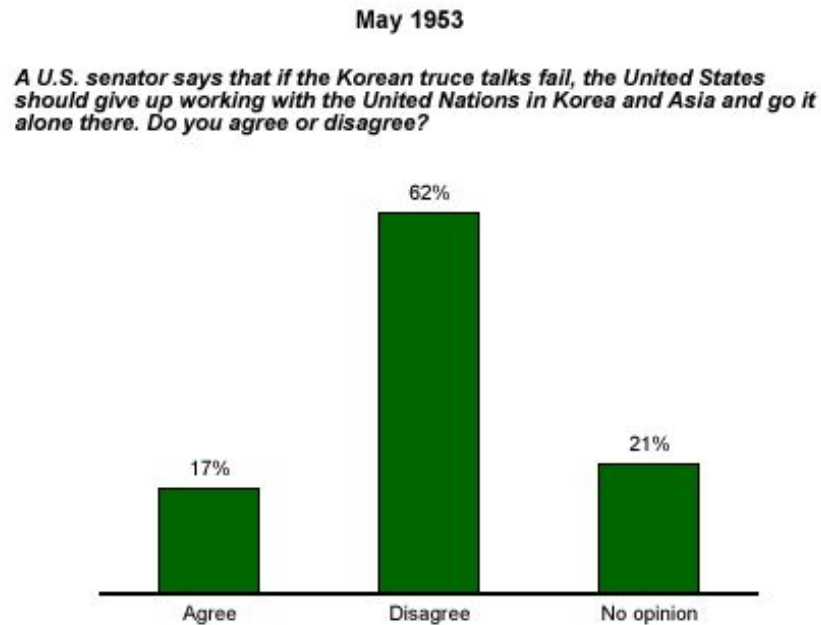
The first noticeable instance in which the Truman Doctrine was used was the Korean War. By using American troops to fight for a democratic regime, the Truman Doctrine displayed its might even after President Truman was out of office. The United States came to the scene as a world police force and was determined to ensure the world knew this (Crabtree, 2003). At this time, there was still clear support for such a declaration, despite the loss of American lives. Many saw the use of the Truman Doctrine to justify police actions throughout the world as a necessity to prevent the spread of Communism and the influence of Soviet Russia (Crabtree, 2003).

Upon the conclusion of the Korean War in 1953, nearly 40,000 Americans lost their lives. The Korean War, for those who did not lose a loved one, was justified. However, for those who lost numerous young men in their communities, the Truman Doctrine was no longer the tried and true method of preventing the spread of Communism (Merrill, 2006). A Gallup poll done throughout the Korean War indicates that as the war went on, half of the United States



believed that a mistake was made when the U.S got involved. This sentiment wouldn't shift until there was progress with peace talks (Crabtree, 2003). Even after successful negotiations, 36% of Americans still

believed that the United States made a mistake. Americans were beginning to see the red flags indicating the shortcoming of the Truman Doctrine.



Gallup contributes again, in which a poll was done in 1953 to ask Americans what the U.S ought to do if peace talks failed. The majority of Americans did not support the actions which the Truman Doctrine advocated for. Because the citizens either did not understand the full effect of the doctrine or the severity of the Korean War, the Truman Doctrine continued to be used and conveyed to the public as the best option in comparison to any alternative (Saad, 2017).

The next major event that occurred in justification of the Truman Doctrine was the Cuban Missile crisis. The United States, as a method of protection of allies in Europe, placed nuclear weapons in Turkey. This move, along with being a defense tactic and deterrent, was done in a democracy ensuring standard (Gaddis, 1974). In response, the USSR placed nuclear weapons in Cuba. President John Kennedy placed the United States on defcon 4, the highest warning level ever reached in the history of the United States. The buildup to such an occurrence within the U.S public manifested in drills in event of a nuclear attack. The United States public could not



avoid the everyday fears of living with the possibility of dying in a nuclear attack. It made the U.S public ultimately question whether being a police force was worth it (Saad, 2017).

Americans would ask themselves if they could afford another Korean War (CVCE, 2020).

The most notable use of the Truman Doctrine is the Vietnam War. With the death of almost 60,000 Americans over the span of 20 years in an effort to preserve the democracy of South Vietnam, the Truman Doctrine was seen as the driving factor and an unjust justification for a war (Merrill, 2006). No longer could the U.S federal government rally the American people behind the idea of communism prevention (Nichols, 2014). With tax dollars and war-time politics being used at every corner to shift public favorability towards the war effort, the Truman Doctrine was shoved into the foreground once again (O'Malley). The operating factor that saw the American people once so adamantly support the Truman Doctrine was the logical idea of the Domino Theory—if one country falls to communism, the country's neighbors will do the same (NBC, 2008). This made it the United State's burden to not only contain communism but also eradicate it (Nichols, 2014).

### **Final Analysis**

Prohibition and the Truman Doctrine both follow clear steps of the projected Reverse Overton Process. Prohibition moved down from policy to popular the moment speak-easys became popularized.

As this path continued, only a greater distaste towards the 18th Amendment became clear. Crime rates and the expansion of the mafia meant that prohibition, despite still being established policy, lacked credibility and was thus no longer acceptable or sensible. The lack of sensibility is only further proven when communities began to see the impact of the loss of

income gained from alcohol. It is vital to note that there is no clear distinction between the acceptable stage and the sensible stage while analyzing the reverse process. The radical stage is extraordinarily noticeable during prohibition: the passage of a modification to the 18th Amendment. At the time of the passage of the modifications, President Roosevelt commented on the dire economic situation in the United States, stating that “[America] could all use a little beer” (National Geographic). Now of course this modification was not the official reversal of the policy, but it represented a massive shift from the era of temperance movements. The true reversal of the 18th Amendment came courtesy of the 21st Amendment—the amendment which set the legal drinking age as well as an official, constitutional reversal of the 18th Amendment. In a modern, 21st century view of prohibition, to revert back to an amended policy would be radical and follows the working definition of radical set forth by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. As formerly mentioned, alcohol is now a staple in the current United States, especially within sports like football. It is this intertwined, inseparable nature between alcohol and the American society which ensures that any legislative action like prohibition is unthinkable. It could never be reenacted.

The Truman Doctrine was enacted, as previously mentioned, as a way to enforce democratic beliefs across the globe. By pure definition, this is a policy. The policy, although a remaining policy, decreased in popularity as it was used. To elaborate, as the Truman Doctrine justified certain United States foreign affairs, less of the American public believed in its original purpose. The Korean war was the first major shift as the people who once supported the doctrine were now able to see the full extent of its implementation. The Cuban missile crisis is a noticeable shift towards acceptable and sensible due to the fact that American’s still believed in

democracy in foreign nations overseas, but understood that there should be some level of restrictions. These reservations against the Truman Doctrine and the application of it were unearthed completely in the Vietnam War. Due to the constant refusal of the United States to call it a war and instead favored political language like “police action,” the U.S public sought for reform. The argument could no longer be made in favor of police actions which saw Americans put at the front lines, officially moving the Truman Doctrine into a radical section of the political spectrum. Upon the enactment of the Reagan Doctrine—doctrine stating that the United States will fight injustices around the world instead of fighting undemocratic governments—the Truman Doctrine was deemed unacceptable.

Despite moving at a different pace, each analyzed policy did progress through some version of a reverse Overton process. Prohibition downgraded to the popular phase, as there were still a majority of Americans who shared the beliefs— a trend noticeable with the Truman Doctrine as well. Where there is grey area amongst the progression of the reverse process is a definitive moment in which a policy was “sensible” while having more support than a potential policy would have in the forward motion at the “acceptable stage.”

It is in this uncertainty in which my hypothesis is deemed incorrect due to inconclusive evidence. Although there is progression from the policy stage of the Overton Window to a radical stage, it cannot be proven with the available information that a policy progresses in the exact reverse motion. Entering the unacceptable stage, this is where a majority of the public does not favor the once favorable policy and the harmful effects are beginning to outweigh the potential benefits. Prohibition saw this as speakeasies were becoming an operating hub for mafia business as well as a center of violence. The Truman Doctrine became unacceptable while more

Americans were dying overseas in battles which the public believed the United States has no business being in. Finally, a once acceptable policy is deemed as radical through hindsight and a reversal policy. Prohibition was reversed through the 21st Amendment, after which alcohol became an integral part in the United States. The Truman Doctrine was reversed by the Reagan Doctrine and now in modern America, to use American troops as a force of democracy enforcement is a radical belief.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

By understanding how policies can eventually become radical for public favorability, the U.S may be able to avoid potentially harmful policies in the first place. Oftentimes in politics, a policy is lobbied for using the argument “for the here and now” with no regard for future implications; however, such disregard is the fuel behind much of the United States’ greatest blunders like Prohibition. The forward Overton Process is a theory which shows how civic actions and public engagement help enact a policy. The newfound Reverse Overton Process simply notes the ability of the general public to respond to the application of a tangible policy. The Reverse Overton Process allows a deeper understanding of the unforeseen consequences of once favorable policies. By referencing the specific events that had to occur in order for each individual policy to revert to unthinkable standards, one may begin to consider the usually unforeseen consequences and take serious considerations before moving ahead with implementation of a new policy.

In order for the Reverse Overton Process to be properly analyzed, further research calls for a longitudinal study that coincides with enactment of a policy which may eventually fall out of public favor. By conducting a study at the same time of a policy, all the relevant polling

information may be gathered and interpreted. Such a study would also be able to properly identify a shortcoming of my research—a determinable difference between the sensible stage and the acceptable stage of the Overton process.

Further research would also be of assistance in attempting to see how different forms of governmental systems progress through policies. The creation of the Overton Window and my subsequent production of the reverse Overton Process apply to U.S policies only. Although my research accounts for a foreign policy, further research could address the specific processes that a communist or socialist form of government may have to progress in. While analyzing whole countries may be of assistance, analyzing local and state government in the United States may also provide insight into the application of the Overton Window.

By determining the reverse process for policies, lawmakers may be able to determine how the public will react as well as provide insight to common American tendencies. It is only with an understanding of the Overton Window, both its forward and reverse motion, that proper policies may be enacted and properly enforced.

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