# What are the primary theories of change linking individual evidence-generating activities (e.g., an evaluation) to specific policy and/or programmatic decisions?

## Executive Summary

This literature review investigates the primary theories of change (ToCs) that explain how evidence-generating activities – such as evaluations – inform policy and programmatic decisions. Recognizing that the use of evidence in decision-making is rarely straightforward or automatic, the review explores a range of theoretical models to understand the causal pathways, assumptions, and contextual factors that shape influence.

Key models include Utilization-Focused Evaluation, which emphasizes stakeholder engagement and intentional use; the Integrated Theory of Evaluation Influence, which highlights indirect and long-term effects; and the Pattern and Ecological Theories, which stress probabilistic outcomes and systemic interdependencies. Behavioral frameworks such as COM-B further underscore that evidence uptake is influenced by users’ capability, opportunity, and motivation.

The review identifies five recurring mechanisms of influence – instrumental, conceptual, process, symbolic, and persuasive – which operate at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels. It challenges common assumptions found in ToCs, including overly rational models of decision-making, the presumed authority of evaluators, and the belief that methodological rigor alone ensures use. It also foregrounds the critical role of context: political dynamics, organizational cultures, leadership support, and timing all significantly mediate the impact of evidence.

Ultimately, the review calls for a more nuanced, flexible approach to theory-building and evaluation practice – one that is informed by empirical complexity and responsive to real-world constraints. Bridging prescriptive and descriptive traditions, and co-producing theories of change with users, can help evaluators enhance both the relevance and influence of their work in policymaking contexts.

## Introduction

What are the primary theories of change linking individual evidence-generating activities, such as evaluations, to specific policy and programmatic decisions? This research question lies at the heart of ongoing efforts to strengthen the use of evidence in governance, policymaking, and public administration. Understanding how evaluation and related knowledge production efforts lead to changes in policy or practice is not simply an academic exercise; it is essential for improving the effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of public institutions. Amid growing investments in evidence generation across sectors and geographies, a nuanced understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of how evidence informs action can guide both evaluators and decision-makers toward more effective and responsive strategies.

This literature review critically examines the main theories of change (ToCs) that aim to explain how evaluations and other evidence-generating activities influence policy and programmatic decisions. Drawing from a wide-ranging body of scholarly and practitioner literature, the review explores both classic and emerging conceptual frameworks, engaging with the theoretical assumptions, causal mechanisms, and contextual contingencies that define these models. The review is structured into seven main sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a conceptual overview of theories of change and introduces key models, each presented in a dedicated subsection. Section 3 examines the mechanisms by which evidence influences decisions, while Section 4 identifies the assumptions – often implicit – embedded in ToCs. Section 5 explores contextual influences that shape or constrain evidence use. Section 6 synthesizes insights across sections, and Section 7 concludes with a summary of findings and implications for theory and practice.

## Overview of Theories of Change Linking Evidence Generation to Policy/ Programmatic Change

A theory of change, in the context of evidence-informed policymaking, is a conceptual or practical framework that articulates how and why a particular evidence-generating activity – such as an evaluation, research study, or performance monitoring effort – might plausibly influence policy decisions or programmatic actions. These theories describe causal linkages between evidence production and decision-making outcomes, specifying key actors, mechanisms, preconditions, and contextual factors. Theories of change vary in their prescriptiveness (whether they aim to guide action or describe observed phenomena), their linearity (whether they assume sequential stages or iterative processes), and their level of analysis (individual, interpersonal, organizational, or systemic).

To provide a clear analytical lens, this section presents a detailed examination of key theories of change drawn from the literature, each in its own subsection.

### Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE)

Michael Quinn Patton’s Utilization-Focused Evaluation (UFE) is one of the most influential prescriptive models in evaluation theory. It asserts that evaluations should be explicitly designed for intended use by specific intended users. This theory of change begins with stakeholder engagement and situational analysis, ensuring that the evaluation is tailored to the political, institutional, and cultural context in which it will be used. The core logic of UFE is straightforward: if primary users are engaged throughout the evaluation process – from scoping and design to interpretation and dissemination – they are more likely to use the findings.

Patton (2020) frames this theory around the idea of intentionality. The role of the evaluator is not to remain detached but to act as a facilitator of use. The theory assumes that direct interaction between evaluators and users, particularly decision-makers, creates a sense of ownership and increases both the relevance and credibility of findings. Evaluations developed without user involvement, by contrast, are more likely to be shelved or ignored. UFE thus emphasizes adaptability, ongoing communication, and a focus on actionable recommendations. While the model has been widely adopted, it presumes the presence of committed users and conducive organizational contexts – conditions that are not always present in complex or politically sensitive environments.

### Integrated Theory of Evaluation Influence

Kathryn Kirkhart’s (2000) Integrated Theory of Evaluation Influence expands the conceptual scope of evaluation use beyond instrumental applications. Rather than focusing solely on whether findings were used in a specific decision, Kirkhart redefines influence as occurring across three dimensions: source (e.g., evaluation findings, processes, or the evaluator), intention (e.g., intentional, unintentional, or strategic influence), and time (e.g., immediate, intermediate, or long-term). This framework reconceptualizes influence not as a discrete event but as a dynamic and often subtle process that unfolds over time and may manifest in changes in thinking, discourse, or organizational norms.

Kirkhart’s contribution is particularly important for recognizing the non-linear and indirect forms of influence that characterize many real-world cases. For example, an evaluation may not lead to immediate policy change but might shape how future decisions are framed, influence public discourse, or contribute to shifts in institutional values. The theory is also agnostic about normative desirability – recognizing that influence may be positive or negative, intentional or accidental. This broader framing helps evaluators document a more complete picture of their work’s effects and encourages methodological pluralism in tracing influence pathways.

### Pattern Theory of Evaluation Use

King and Alkin (2018) revisit and synthesize earlier models to articulate the Pattern Theory of Evaluation Use. This theory is descriptive and realist in nature, articulating the conditions under which evaluation use is more likely to occur. According to this model, use is a probabilistic outcome that arises when specific types of users (those motivated to use evidence) engage with specific types of evaluators (those committed to fostering use) using appropriate methods in conducive contexts. The theory does not specify a deterministic causal chain but rather identifies a constellation of interacting factors that tend to support use.

Crucially, the Pattern Theory departs from rigid, logic model-style frameworks. It acknowledges the diversity of evaluation contexts and proposes that influence is more likely when evaluations are conducted with credible methods, in organizations that value learning, and among users who are empowered to act. While less prescriptive than UFE, the Pattern Theory still offers guidance for evaluators: understand your users, select appropriate methods, and work within the constraints and opportunities of the policy environment. Its “tendency-based” approach aligns with realist evaluation traditions, which emphasize contextual variation and probabilistic causality.

### Ecological Model of Evaluation Use

The Ecological Model of Evaluation Use, articulated by Ottoson and Martinez (2010) and discussed by King and Alkin (2018), draws inspiration from ecological systems theory. It views evaluation use as embedded within multiple, interrelated “ecosystems” that include the program context, the organizational setting, the professional field, and broader societal or political forces. The theory posits that influence flows in multiple directions, across levels, and often through feedback loops.

Unlike linear models that suggest evaluation follows a straight path from findings to decisions, the ecological model sees use as emerging from interactions within and between systems. A decision-maker might be influenced by professional norms, peer networks, organizational mandates, and the political climate – all of which interact with evaluation findings in complex ways. This theory provides a compelling account of evaluation influence in decentralized or multi-actor governance systems, where no single agent controls the decision-making process. It also reinforces the need for multi-level evaluation strategies that consider systemic enablers and barriers.

### Pyramid and Results Chain Models

Siar (2023) presents the Pyramid Model and the Results Chain as two approaches to mapping how evidence might influence different stakeholders. Although these models can help illustrate plausible causal pathways, they are likewise not formal theories of change by default; rather, they represent frameworks for structuring ideas about how inputs (including research and evaluations) could lead to policy or programmatic decisions.

The Pyramid Model depicts influence as a progression from awareness (evidence is noticed), to influence (evidence is considered), and ultimately to impact (evidence informs a decision). This progression can be useful for charting where evidence may “stall” or fail to gain traction. However, the Pyramid Model’s staging is essentially an organizational tool, rather than a declaration that a single causal mechanism governs the entire evidence-to-policy process.

In contrast, the Results Chain organizes evidence and activities into a linear sequence: inputs → activities → outputs → outcomes → impacts. While some critics argue it may oversimplify how evidence influences policy, Siar (2023) specifically adapts the Results Chain to conceptualize the evidence-to-policy process, proposing possible indicators (such as the number of policymaker inquiries, legislative references, or frequency of research cited in government briefings) to measure whether and how evidence travels through each link in the chain. When applied in this way, the Results Chain serves as a structured logic model helping researchers pinpoint where, in a complicated policy environment, their evidence is likely to be taken up.

Ultimately, both the Pyramid Model and the Results Chain can inform theories of how evidence leads to policy decisions, but they themselves are best understood as frameworks for mapping out program logic and potential influence pathways. Their usefulness lies in the detailed, step-by-step approach to identifying potential blockages or enablers – thus aligning with this review’s core question. By clarifying the pathways, assumptions, and possible indicators at each stage, these models help stakeholders and evaluators focus on the critical junctures where evidence may meaningfully shape decision-making.

### COM-B and Behavior Change Models

The COM-B model, applied by Clark et al. (2024) to evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM), frames evidence use as a behavior that depends on Capability (skills and knowledge), Opportunity (external conditions), and Motivation (internal drivers). This behavioral lens shifts attention from evidence supply to the readiness and ability of users to act. For example, a policymaker may not use evidence if they lack the skill to interpret it, if their organizational context does not reward its use, or if they are not personally committed to evidence-informed practice.

COM-B provides a diagnostic framework for identifying bottlenecks and tailoring interventions. It also aligns with other multidimensional models like Langer et al.’s (2016) framework, which identifies mechanisms such as awareness, agreement, access, interaction, ability, and institutionalization. These models encourage evaluators and reformers to move beyond dissemination and invest in the conditions that support sustainable evidence use.

### Multiple Streams Framework

The Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), originally developed by John Kingdon (1995), offers a heuristic model for understanding how evidence and ideas influence policy change under conditions of ambiguity. MSF assumes that policy processes are inherently chaotic due to fluid participation, unclear preferences, and uncertain technologies. Within this context, policy change occurs when three semi-independent “streams” – problems, policies, and politics – are coupled during a fleeting policy window by strategic actors known as policy entrepreneurs (Fowler, 2020).

In the MSF, the *problem stream* refers to societal conditions that attract policymakers' attention – often through focusing events, feedback, or indicators. The *policy stream* contains a range of technically and politically feasible solutions generated within policy communities. The *politics stream* comprises the broader political climate, including electoral dynamics, public opinion, and interest group mobilization. When these three streams converge, a policy window opens, providing an opportunity for policy adoption. This coupling does not guarantee success but significantly increases the likelihood of change (Herweg, Zahariadis, & Zohlnhöfe, 2018; Fowler, 2020).

Traditionally associated with agenda-setting and policy adoption, MSF has more recently been extended to the implementation phase. Fowler (2020) reconceptualizes implementation not merely as a follow-on step but as an interdependent process where ambiguity persists. Implementers – actors responsible for operationalizing adopted policies – must interpret abstract policy directives in real-world conditions. In this phase, the streams manifest differently: the *policy stream* becomes a contest over interpretations rather than proposals; the *problem stream* narrows to issues already prioritized by policymakers; and the *politics stream* reflects local pressures and accountability dynamics.

Fowler (2020) advances the theory by modeling policy adoption and implementation as linked yet distinct subprocesses within a broader policy system. Using data on state-level implementation of federal environmental policy, he finds that the effects of politics on both adoption and implementation are conditional on the status of current policies and problems. Moreover, outputs from one phase shape the streams of the other, indicating a recursive relationship. For instance, adopted policies serve as the basis for policy interpretation during implementation, while implementation outcomes – e.g., changes in environmental indicators – feed back into the problem stream, potentially reactivating the policy cycle. This refined MSF thus captures both collective choice and collective action as integrated, stream-driven phenomena that evolve over time.

## Mechanisms Linking Evidence to Policy and Programmatic Decisions

While each theory frames the mechanism linking evidence to decision-making differently, there is broad consensus in the literature that influence is not monolithic. Instead, evaluation findings and processes can be used in multiple ways, including instrumental, conceptual, process, symbolic, and persuasive uses. These typologies offer a vocabulary for understanding the many ways in which evidence can inform or shape decisions, whether directly, indirectly, or even strategically.

Instrumental use refers to the direct application of evaluation findings to alter or inform decisions – such as continuing, modifying, scaling, or discontinuing a program (Johnson, 1998). This is perhaps the most intuitive and desired form of use, and it underpins linear theories of change like Siar’s (2023) Result Chain approach for evidence to decision-making. However, it is also the most difficult to achieve, as it depends on perfect alignment between evidence relevance, timing, and decision-making needs.

Conceptual use, by contrast, involves the gradual influence of evaluation on decision-makers' understanding, frames of reference, or policy beliefs. As Weiss (1979) argued through her "enlightenment model," evaluation can permeate discourse and thinking long before it is used in a specific decision. This form of influence is prominent in theories such as the Integrated Theory of Evaluation Influence (Kirkhart, 2000) and is particularly salient in long-term policy learning processes.

Process use refers to learning, attitude shifts, or behavioral changes that occur as a result of participating in the evaluation process itself (Patton, 2020). Even when findings are not immediately used, the act of conducting or engaging with an evaluation can enhance stakeholder capacities, increase buy-in, or improve internal decision-making processes. UFE and realist evaluation both recognize the significance of process use, particularly in complex and participatory environments.

Symbolic use occurs when evaluations are used to legitimize pre-determined decisions, demonstrate accountability, or fulfill procedural requirements (Mark & Henry, 2004). While often critiqued as superficial or politically motivated, symbolic use can still generate value by institutionalizing evidence practices or signaling a commitment to transparency.

Persuasive or strategic use involves deploying evaluation findings as rhetorical tools in advocacy or negotiation settings. This form of influence is particularly relevant in adversarial or politically charged policy contexts, where actors selectively use evidence to support their positions or to shift policy narratives (Siar, 2023).

The Schematic Theory of Evaluation Influence (Mark & Henry, 2004), as referenced in King & Alkin (2018), further disaggregates these mechanisms across three levels. At the individual level, evaluations may shape beliefs, skills, or behaviors. At the interpersonal level, influence may occur through deliberation, coalition-building, or norm-setting. At the collective level, evaluations may trigger policy adoption, institutional reform, or broader cultural change. Similarly, the COM-B framework (Clark et al., 2024) situates evidence use within a behavioral model, emphasizing the need for capability (skills), opportunity (institutional structures), and motivation (internal drivers) for influence to occur.

Together, these models underscore that evidence use is not solely a matter of dissemination or relevance. It is mediated by behavioral, social, and institutional dynamics that often transcend the content of the evaluation itself.

## Underlying Assumptions of Theories of Change Linking Evidence and Decision-Making

Every theory of change embeds assumptions – explicit or implicit – about how evidence functions, who uses it, and under what conditions it has influence. A critical review of these assumptions is essential to assess the plausibility, generalizability, and practical applicability of each model.

The rational actor assumption is perhaps the most pervasive, with many theories of change and frameworks assuming that decision-makers are rational agents who seek out and apply evidence to make better choices. In practice, as Kirkhart (2000) and Siar (2023) note, decision-making is shaped as much by ideology, institutional politics, and public pressure as by reasoned deliberation.

Another common assumption is that evidence quality and methodological rigor are sufficient for influence. However, multiple studies (e.g., Brousselle & Buregeya, 2018; Patton, 2020) suggest that credibility alone does not guarantee use. Findings must also be relevant, timely, accessible, and aligned with decision-maker priorities.

Several theories assume that evaluators have influence over the evaluation process and its outcomes. This is central to UFE, realist evaluation, and Kirkhart’s integrated theory, all of which posit that the evaluator’s role in fostering engagement, tailoring methods, and facilitating interpretation is crucial. Yet, in many bureaucratic or hierarchical contexts, evaluators operate under constraints that limit their agency.

Assumptions about timing also permeate the literature. Many theories presume that evaluations are available at the right moment to inform decisions, yet Fowler (2020) and others have shown that evaluation findings often miss policy windows or emerge after key decisions have already been made. Timing mismatches undermine even the best-designed evaluations.

Finally, trust is a foundational but often under-theorized assumption. For evidence to be used – whether instrumentally, conceptually, or symbolically – there must be trust in the evaluators, the methods, and the process. This trust is shaped by interpersonal relationships, institutional histories, and sociopolitical dynamics (Raymaekers et al., 2025). Without it, even the most methodologically sound evidence may be disregarded.

## Contextual Influences on Evidence Uptake and Use

Context is not a passive backdrop but an active determinant of whether and how evidence influences policy and practice. Theories of change that ignore contextual variation risk overgeneralization and limited practical utility. Conversely, models that explicitly incorporate context – such as realist evaluation, the Ecological Model, or the Multiple Streams Framework – offer more nuanced and actionable insights.

Political context is among the most influential factors. In authoritarian regimes, evidence may be suppressed or used strategically to legitimize decisions. In democratic systems, competing political agendas may distort or selectively interpret findings. Siar (2023) emphasizes how ruling elites may monopolize knowledge production, while King and Alkin (2018) describe how entrenched interests resist evaluative insights that threaten the status quo.

Organizational context also plays a central role. Institutions with embedded evaluation cultures, formal learning mechanisms, and dedicated knowledge infrastructure are more likely to use evidence (Christie & Lemire, 2019). Raymaekers et al. (2025) demonstrate that organizational norms – such as a results-oriented culture – correlate with higher levels of evidence-informed policymaking.

Leadership and championing are critical contextual enablers. Senior officials who value evaluation and model its use can create an enabling environment for evidence uptake (Clark et al., 2024). Conversely, frequent leadership turnover or weak managerial support undermines continuity and institutional memory.

Timing and the policy cycle are additional contextual variables. As Fowler (2020) explains, evidence is most likely to be used when problem recognition, political will, and policy solutions align – a confluence described by the Multiple Streams Framework. Missed timing can render otherwise relevant findings obsolete.

Resource availability is a more pragmatic but no less important consideration. Conducting, disseminating, and acting on evaluations requires funding, staff, and time – resources often lacking in overstretched public bureaucracies. Raymaekers et al. (2025) find that while budget constraints hinder evidence use, paradoxically, higher budgets do not guarantee it, suggesting that institutional alignment may be more decisive than resources alone.

## Synthesis and Thematic Integration

The theories, mechanisms, assumptions, and contextual influences reviewed above converge on several important themes. First, the use of evidence is multi-dimensional and contingent. Instrumental use is only one possible outcome – and often the least likely. More common are conceptual and process uses, which unfold over time and are shaped by interpersonal relationships, institutional routines, and political calculations. Recognizing these forms of influence helps reframe success in evaluation beyond narrow metrics of utilization.

Second, influence is inherently contextual. No theory of change can be universally applied without adaptation. Whether an evaluation is used depends as much on its timing, the credibility of its champions, and the receptiveness of the organizational environment as on the quality of its design. As such, evaluators must adopt flexible, context-sensitive approaches. Theory-based models like realist evaluation or COM-B offer useful frameworks for navigating complexity.

Third, the literature reveals persistent tensions between prescriptive and descriptive approaches. UFE and Results Chain models offer clear guidance for practice but may oversimplify causality. Descriptive theories like Kirkhart’s or the Ecological Model offer richer explanatory power but less operational clarity. Bridging these traditions – through adaptive, theory-informed evaluation planning – can help evaluators better align design with the realities of influence.

Fourth, there is an urgent need to revisit the assumptions that underpin theories of change. Rationality, linearity, evaluator control, and trust cannot be taken for granted. Evaluators must anticipate constraints, identify enablers, and design strategies that respond to the real-world messiness of policymaking. Only then can ToCs serve not just as abstract models but as practical tools for enhancing influence.

## Conclusion

This literature review examined the principal theories of change that link evidence-generating activities, particularly evaluations, to policy and programmatic decisions. It synthesized insights from prescriptive models such as Utilization-Focused Evaluation and Results Chains, as well as descriptive frameworks like the Integrated Theory of Influence, the Ecological Model, and Realist Evaluation. Across these theories, five key mechanisms of influence – instrumental, conceptual, process, symbolic, and persuasive – emerged as recurring pathways. These mechanisms are mediated by behavioral, organizational, and political dynamics, and they operate across individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels.

The review also unpacked the foundational assumptions embedded in these theories, including beliefs about rationality, evaluator influence, and the intrinsic value of evidence. These assumptions often fail to reflect the realities of decision-making, especially in politicized or resource-constrained contexts. Contextual factors – such as institutional culture, leadership support, policy timing, and stakeholder engagement – were shown to exert powerful influence on whether and how evaluations inform action.

For evaluation theory and practice, the findings underscore the value of dynamic, multidimensional theories of change that integrate both normative aspirations and empirical complexity. Evaluators must be theory-informed yet context-aware, balancing methodological rigor with political realism. Theory development should further integrate perspectives from political science, behavioral economics, and organizational theory to refine our understanding of influence. Meanwhile, practitioners should collaborate with users to co-produce grounded, context-sensitive theories of change, building the trust, relevance, and alignment necessary for evaluation to truly shape decisions.

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