

Embedding Equity into Policy

Best Practices in a Shifting Political Climate



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The Greenlining Institute

Founded in 1993, Greenlining is committed to building a just economy that is inclusive, cooperative, sustainable, participatory, fair, and healthy. We work towards a future where communities of color can build wealth, live in healthy places filled with economic opportunity, and are ready to meet the challenges posed by climate change. Our multifaceted advocacy efforts address the root causes of racial, economic, and environmental inequities in order to meaningfully transform the material conditions of communities of color in California and across the country

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Best Practices in a Shifting Political Climate

Advancing equity for low-income communities and communities of color in this volatile political climate requires more than good intentions and necessitates courage, strategy, and action. Equity is essential to [democracy](#) and [good governance](#), ensuring that policies are fair, inclusive, and address the needs of all our communities — especially historically disinvested ones. As *Abundance* policies aim to accelerate the delivery of essential needs, goods, and services, we must ensure that all communities benefit sustainably and equitably.

Greenlining's *Embedding Equity Into Policy* toolkit offers a clear, practical framework that centers equity in a policy's goal, process, outcome(s), and evaluation across diverse political, geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts.

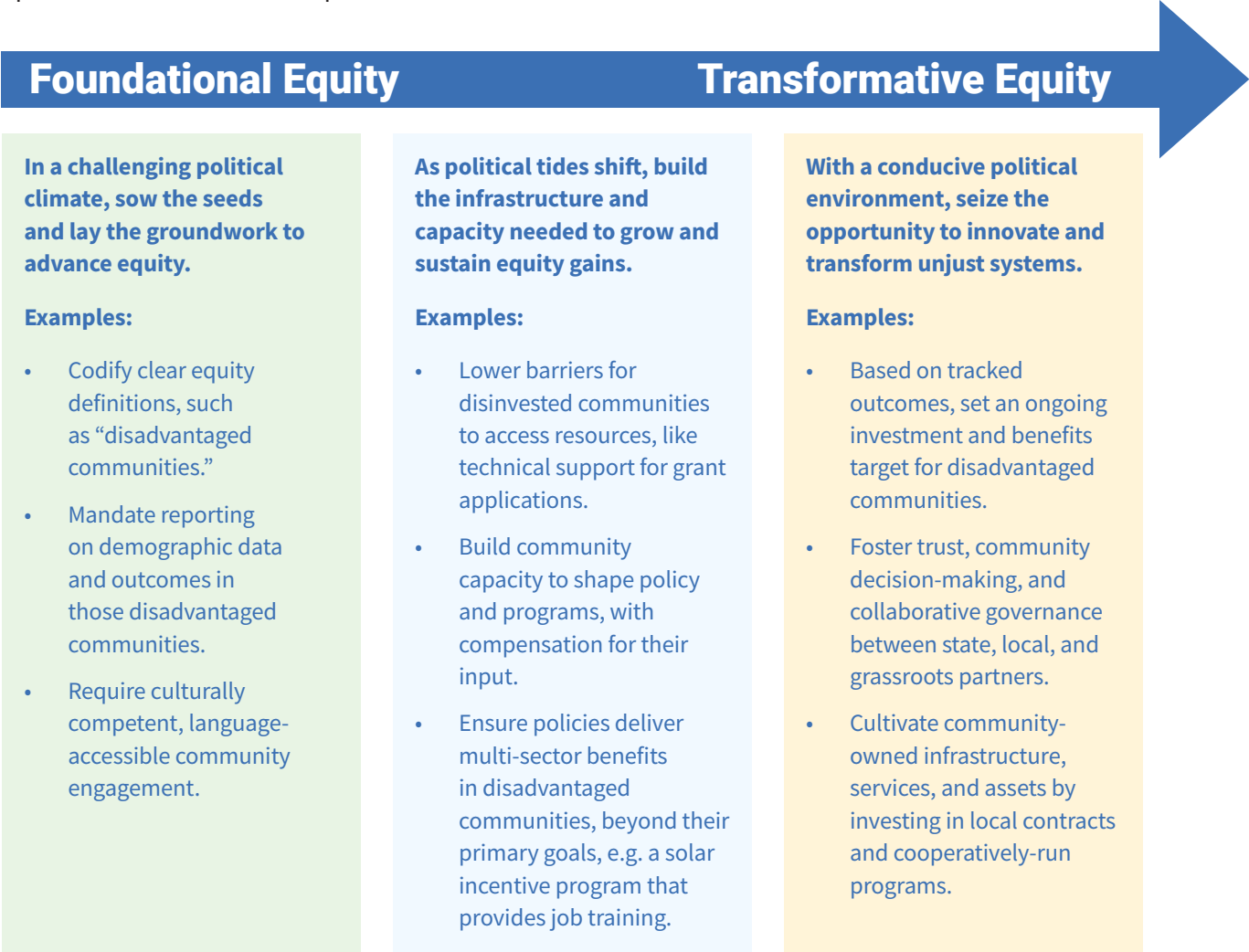
Greenlining's *Embedding Equity into Policy* toolkit is a timely resource for legislators, policymakers, and changemakers to bring lasting, transformative change and equity for everyone. Built upon [generations of advocacy](#), the toolkit draws from [real-world examples](#) and [lessons across states](#) — offering practical strategies to win with our communities while keeping equity at the center of policy. As [equity is challenged](#), this is your invitation to act boldly, stand with communities, and shape policies that build a just future for all.

1: Strategies to Advance Equity in a Challenging Political Climate

The [federal rollback](#) on [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility](#) programs, [mass firings](#) and reductions in [civil rights offices](#), [data erasure](#), and [environmental deregulation](#) — paired with sweeping budget cuts from the [Department of Government Efficiency](#) for essential services and programs — have created [a chilling effect](#) on expanding equity programs and policies, even in [progressive states](#). But communities need equity now more than ever. **Equity translates values into practice to deliver real outcomes in healthy living, economic security, and opportunity for all.** When policymakers remove barriers for those excluded, they create a system that works for everyone. This toolkit offers bold and practical strategies to embed equity into every step of policy making — even in the most challenging [political climates](#).

1.1: Elevating Equity to Meet the Political Moment

Successful equitable policies are implemented with intention, are well-resourced, and enforced through shifting political climates. To improve our conditions for winning long-lasting equity policies, Greenlining identifies a spectrum of equity approaches: foundational to transformative. **Foundational equity** approaches are the essential first steps focused on harm reduction, more accessible wins, and groundwork. Yet foundational approaches are insufficient on their own to advance equity. **Transformative equity** approaches dig deeper: they aim to shift power, dismantle unjust systems and structures, and drive long-term systems change. While harder to achieve, studies show they offer massive socioeconomic returns. Both are necessary, and as the diagram illustrates, strategies build upon each other across this spectrum.



It is critical to assess which equity approaches are politically feasible now, while still paving the way for deeper change in the future. Foundational steps, like advancing data transparency through bills, build the case for future investments in impacted communities — as illustrated in [California’s Transportation Accountability Act](#) and [Arizona’s H.B. 2835](#) that fortified the state’s [Drought Contingency Plan](#). As politics shift, our language must also evolve.

1.2: Adapting Equity Language for Community Impact

Thoughtfully crafting language and narratives that resist [legal scrutiny](#) and build [durable policies](#) is an important strategy for delivering strong equity outcomes for communities.

Best Practice	Examples
<p>Shift from explicit race-based descriptors to discourse and metrics that are race-conscious or race-neutral. This can retain benefits for racial and ethnic groups while maintaining legal defensibility.</p>	<p>Rather than using race as a standalone factor, combine race-conscious data proxies such as pollution, income, health, and housing to identify disadvantaged communities and their needs, as shown by Colorado EnviroScreen 2.0 and the Maryland EJ Screening Tool.</p>
<p>Use a targeted universalism approach. Set a universal goal with strategies tailored to those most impacted, like curb cuts designed for wheelchair users that also benefit parents with strollers, travelers with suitcases, and seniors.</p>	<p>Bus-only and protected bike lanes are designed to expand access for low-income riders — yet benefit all by easing traffic and cutting emissions. Georgia's H.B. 511 boosts transit statewide, delivering shared gains even for non-transit users.</p>
<p>Reframe “diversity, equity, inclusion” to more precise outcomes rooted in shared values such as affordability, accessibility, fairness, public health and safety, and others.</p>	<p>Montana's S.B.150 and Oregon's Energy Affordability Act both uplift the shared value of ensuring affordability for all by addressing the specific needs of low-income, energy-burdened families.</p>

2: A Roadmap to Embed Equity into Policy

Policies intended to advance equity fall flat without clear strategy, implementation, and accountability. Ideally, a policy encompasses equity at every stage, or a package of policies together may help advance equity over time.

2.1: Embed Equity in the Vision, Goal, and Values of the Policy

Start with a clear vision that centers equity for your policy, then ground the policy in equity values, and determine the goal of your policy for target communities. Political realities will shape how a policy elaborates its commitment to equity — how equity is defined, how foundational or transformative a policy can be, or how equity is tailored to the context of a specific community. Greenlining, for example, defines equity through a racial equity lens: transforming systems and structures that harm people of color by expanding access to power, redistributing resources, and removing barriers to opportunity. We all contribute to diverse but necessary definitions of equity, as others may focus on equity across lines of class, gender, disability, etc. In certain contexts, explicitly naming race is possible; in others, race-conscious proxies like “low-income” or “fiscally disadvantaged” may be more strategic.

Vision: Name your commitment to equity and specify the communities your policy aims to uplift.

- *“The vision is for low-income and pollution-burdened communities to have clean air, find job opportunities, and share decision-making power for projects to meet their needs.”*

Goal: Break down how your policy will drive equity into practice.

- *“The policy goal is to establish a state-funded program that incorporates a community-driven process and oversees grants for projects that would decarbonize homes and businesses in low-income and pollution-burdened communities.”*

Values: These ground a policy’s vision and goals. Here is a sample of core equity values to guide your policy:

- 1. Racial and Social Equity:** Transform the institutions and systems that harm marginalized communities.
- 2. Community Leadership:** Share power. Invest in community voices and defer to local ownership.
- 3. Sustainable and Intersectional Solutions:** Tackle root causes with long-term, cross-issue strategies.
- 4. Transparency and Accountability:** Build trust through openness, accountability, and shared governance.
- 5. Respectful Participation:** Foster collaboration with cultural sensitivity, patience, and mutual respect.

2.2: Embed Equity in the Process Described in the Policy

An equitable process sets the foundation for delivering equitable outcomes. Policies should be written in a way that requires deep, ongoing, and meaningful engagement with community partners — centering their priorities, needs, and lived experiences to inform impactful and inclusive implementation.

Foundational Equity to Transformative Equity



Best Practice	Examples
Multi-cultural awareness , sensitivity, competence, and language accessibility in community engagement.	The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality expanded language access for pollution permit decisions by providing interpreters at public meetings and meeting materials in multiple languages.
Equitable payment, recognition, and compensation for community engagement.	Washington State’s S.B. 5793 directs state agencies to compensate individuals who participate in state-hosted workgroups and have been historically excluded from policy discussions.
Make public funds more accessible to under-resourced communities.	West Virginia’s H.B. 4479 established a commission to help small coal towns secure grants and match funds, with a focus on providing vocational and entrepreneurial training to displaced miners for new careers.
Establish community-driven decision-making and collaborative stakeholder structures.	California’s A.B. 2722 created the Transformative Climate Communities program, empowering the most pollution-burdened communities to design and implement tailored climate projects with health, economic, and emission-reduction benefits. The bill requires a Collaborative Stakeholder Structure to ensure shared decision-making between local government and community partners.

2.3: Embed Equity in the Outcomes Described in the Policy

Equity outcomes should be clear, measurable, and specific about who benefits — especially the most impacted communities. They should be built to last. Different policy designs yield different equity impacts, and outcomes should align with the policy’s purpose to deliver tangible and meaningful change for communities.

Foundational Equity to Transformative Equity

Best Practice	Examples
Require multi-sector outcomes in disadvantaged communities, beyond the primary intent of the policy.	Maryland’s Clean Energy Jobs Act has raised renewable energy targets, created green jobs through Project Labor Agreements and grants, and dedicated \$7 million to small business and minority-, women-, and veteran-owned clean energy businesses.
Set an investment and benefits target for disadvantaged communities.	Washington’s Climate Commitment Act and Virginia’s H.B. 1526 both establish target investment goals that would direct a set percentage of funds to overburdened communities, economically disadvantaged communities, and tribal communities.
Use public funds to expand community-owned assets.	North Carolina’s H.B. 589 requires Duke Energy to offer community solar in North Carolina, allowing residents to co-own or subscribe to shared solar energy facilities.

2.4: Embed Equity in the Evaluation of the Policy

Policies should embed ongoing, transparent evaluation of their equity impacts — tracking what’s working, what’s not, and how to improve outcomes for communities over time.

Foundational Equity to Transformative Equity



Best Practice	Examples
Embed an equity lens in data collection.	Florida’s H.B. 7019 has established funds for community resilience planning to help local governments assess how projects assist financially disadvantaged communities .
Embed a root-cause analysis in evaluation.	Based on S.B. 21-181 , the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment and the Health Equity Commission are required to produce a report that assesses systemic inequities in social determinants of health, such as racial and ethnic health disparities.
Integrate equity impact assessments .	Massachusetts’s Executive Order No. 612 requires all Executive Department agencies to conduct ongoing equity assessments of existing and proposed policies, programs, and decisions.
Track real-time impact of benefits for target communities and use data to inform future equitable investments .	New York’s Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act and California’s S.B. 535 not only require climate investment targets to benefit disadvantaged communities of color, but also require the tracking of investments and benefits reporting for state compliance.



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