



COALITION BEST PRACTICES NDI West Bank and Gaza

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This document outlines some of the best practices of successful political coalitions and sets forth issues which political parties and other organizations should consider when attempting to build a new coalition, or strengthen an existing one. Many of these core coalition-building principles may also be relevant to civil society coalitions. Topics covered include: coalition building, maintenance, structure, communication, targeting and outreach, resource management and electoral strategy.

There are three main reasons political coalitions are formed: In government, to secure a governing majority; in opposition, to create a credible alternative to government; and during elections, to consolidate electoral support and maximize results.

There are several essential ingredients of a successful coalition:

- The coalition must be beneficial to all of its constituent parts; there must be something in it for everyone.
- There must be mutual respect and understanding. Each partner must demonstrate an ability to understand the others' point of view, even when there is disagreement.
- There must be a willingness to compromise.
- There must be a sense of partnership, even if member parties are different in size. Partnership does not mean that all responsibilities and positions are divided evenly within the coalition, but that each grouping is respected for the unique attributes it brings to the coalition and has an equitable and fair say in how decisions are made and benefits distributed.

An "equitable partnership" can depend on many factors, including the size of member parties. For example, the Rainbow Coalition in Ireland was composed of three parties: one large, one medium, and one small. As a result, positions in that coalition were divided on a 3:2:1 ratio.

Building a Coalition

There are several key factors involved in building a successful coalition.

- In the first instance it is important to determine interest among parties. This can be done through informal soundings or direct contact. Time and credibility can be lost by approaching every possible combination of partners without first identifying parties that are inclined towards opening negotiations and those who are firmly set on a different course.
- In preparation for negotiations, each constituent party should develop a position paper that outlines party positions on key issues. This will help crystallize where member parties agree and disagree on different issues and will, in turn, facilitate the negotiation process.
- A negotiation process, and an appropriate negotiations team, should be agreed on before negotiations commence. It is important that party leaders not be involved in the negotiating process, but that negotiators are appointed by leaders and are given clear instructions to negotiate on the party's behalf. In this way, party leaders can serve as a final "court of appeal" for negotiations if an impasse arises. In contrast, if party leaders are directly involved in the negotiation process, there is no higher authority to resolve disputes in the event of an impasse.
- Member parties must know what they want to achieve in coalition, but must also be realistic in evaluating what can be achieved in partnership.
- Member parties should establish, up front, their core principles that cannot be conceded or negotiated. Each party will have them and they must be dealt with in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. The final coalition agreement will include each party's core policy principles that have been arrived at through "trade offs" between the parties. Others will have been set aside in the interest of reaching agreement. Parties should recognize that not everything can be achieved in a partnership.
- In order to hold the attention of all participants throughout the negotiating process, partners should adhere to an "all or nothing" negotiating strategy where "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." This "package" strategy will ensure that all parties remain engaged through the duration of the process, and will prevent individual parties from disengaging when they get what they want.
- When a coalition agreement is finally reached, it can be beneficial to have it published as a formal document signed by all parties to demonstrate coalition unity, to promote transparency and to avoid different interpretations and misunderstandings. The publication of the terms of the agreement can be done in a number of ways including a special booklet, press release, joint, party newspaper, etc.
- Member parties must recognize the importance of "selling" the agreement to the party's grassroots, the most important constituency to have on board. Party leaders often take for granted, upon entering a coalition, that the party's grassroots will simply "follow." However, this is frequently where parties encounter the most resistance, as grassroots supporters tend to be the most polarized and partisan, and can perceive coalitions as compromising the party's identity. Adequate time and resources must therefore be allocated to explain the coalition to grassroots supporters, and to ensure their "buy-in" to the coalition's objectives.

Maintaining a Coalition

- It is essential to maintain constant communication and consultation between coalition partners at all leadership levels; there is no such thing as “too much communication” between parties in coalition.
- A dispute resolution mechanism should be established and agreed upon by all coalition partners at the outset. This mechanism can be an honest broker, someone well respected within the coalition or a person outside the coalition framework. It is much easier to agree to a dispute resolution framework before disputes arise, rather than afterwards.
- Internal disputes or disagreements must be kept confidential. When problems do arise, confidentiality is essential to maintain member parties’ confidence and to avoid weakening the coalition. Individual parties should not seek to gain advantage through “leaks” or the public airing of internal disputes.

Coalition Structure

- Coalition leadership must be readily identifiable, recognizable and decisive. They must give the coalition a clear sense of direction. This point is particularly relevant as there can sometimes be a conflict between a leader’s role in his/her party and in the coalition, and these roles need to be finely balanced.
- Decision-making within the coalition should be a clearly defined process. An effort should be made, however, to engage different groups in this process. When feasible, decision-making should be devolved to lower-level coalition bodies, both to empower these bodies and to ensure that top leaders are not constantly tied up in every coalition decision.
- There are three general options for defining and building coalition membership:
 - 1) Party-based membership, where members of participating parties constitute the coalition’s membership;
 - 2) Coalition-based membership, where both party members and non-party members become coalition members outside of the party framework;
 - or 3) A mixture of both, where party members constitute membership and the coalition also recruits independents and others to join outside of the party framework.
- Strategies for membership recruitment are then decided by how membership is defined. For example, if the coalition has party-based membership, the individual parties will seek to increase their own membership and, in doing so, will increase the membership of the coalition. If there is coalition-based membership, the coalition will reach out to both party members and others to create its own, separate membership list.

Communicating as a Coalition

- The coalition should speak with one voice. This does not mean that only one person speaks on behalf of the coalition, but that the coalition uses the same language, ideas, and positions in addressing the public. A single spokesperson, or several spokespeople, should be appointed to speak on behalf of the coalition. This will also help to develop the coalition’s relationship with the media.

- The coalition should be “branded,” with a unique logo, message and set of slogans that can be easily identified and recognized by the public. “Branding” is particularly important for opposition or electoral coalitions. Individual logos of member parties can also be featured next to the coalition logo or message to increase public recognition of who is in the coalition.
- Internal communication between and within member parties and groups is critical in ensuring that the coalition communicates effectively with the public and grassroots members fully understand the reason for certain decisions.

Targeting/Outreach

- Members should agree in advance on what sectors of society comprise the coalition’s main target audience: Who are the coalition’s base and persuadable voters? What types of voters is the coalition looking to attract? Where do these voters live? Otherwise valuable time and resources will be wasted on voters who are not receptive to the coalition’s message.
- Voter outreach and message development are particularly important for coalitions that are building their base and looking toward elections. Coalitions should reach out to citizens during the message development and policy-making processes to solicit their feedback, to acquaint them with the coalition and to ultimately ensure that a developed message resonates with base and persuadable voters. This can be done through formal research, public meetings, and door-to-door canvassing.

Managing Shared Resources

- Membership fees, party contributions and coalition-organized fundraising events are standard methods for coalition fundraising.
- A central fund can be established for shared expenses and activities. It is not necessary for parties to invest all of their resources in a “joint” account.
- The creation of parallel structures that duplicate efforts and waste limited resources should be avoided. Are there people in the coalition and the parties with redundant dual roles? Can these positions be consolidated? Rather than funding three offices in one area, can the coalition consolidate office space and fund only one?
- Member parties should also be open to sharing resources in different regions; efficient tradeoffs can often be made.
- The coalition should agree on a budget in advance, monitor it closely, and determine the funding priorities. This is much easier outside the pressure of an election cycle, when more rational calculations can be made without the political pressure of an election.

<p>National cooperation implemented on the regional level can greatly increase the efficiency of a coalition. For instance, Party #1 might have many volunteers in a particular district, but no office space. Party #2, on the other hand, might have a large office in the same district, but few volunteers. Working in coalition, Party #1 volunteers can work in Party #2’s office – thus maximizing efficiency, cooperation, and saving limited coalition and party resources.</p>
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Electoral Strategy in Coalition

- Like any political party, a coalition needs a strategic approach to elections: the goal is to maximize the number of seats that the coalition wins. This does not necessarily mean, however, maximizing the number of candidates the coalition runs. Electoral strategy is usually determined by the electoral system, though other factors should also be taken into account.
- There should be a division of responsibilities based on the strengths and weaknesses of member parties and groups in each area. To maximize effectiveness, the coalition should evaluate where each of its constituent parts is strongest and weakest and then formulate and implement election strategy accordingly.
- There should be mutual agreement on how coalition candidates are selected and put forward.
- Coalition members should agree in advance on election material, including logo, message and slogans.