

# COALITIONS: A GUIDE FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

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Political parties around the world form coalitions for different reasons: to improve electoral prospects, to form a majority for government or to usher their countries through periods of crisis. What lessons learned could make these coalition-building efforts more successful? Based on input from political party leaders who have worked in coalitions in their own countries, here are some practical tips.



## Step 1: Developing a Party Strategy

The first step in coalition-building should be the development of a party-specific strategy. Parties that develop a good strategy before they embark on negotiations are more likely to identify strategic partners, negotiate a good deal and avoid some of the common pitfalls associated with coalition-building.

- Determine the objective(s) of the coalition.
- Check the legal framework.
- Check the internal party rules.
- Clarify and communicate any additional internal party rules and procedures that may be needed.
- Establish a team to draft a party strategy. The strategy team should:
  - Review the party's strengths and weaknesses;
  - Do as much research as possible on potential partners;
  - Prioritize the party's policies, clarifying first and second preferences as well as any "redlines";
  - Prioritize other coalition-building demands (e.g., ministerial or candidate slots, staffing arrangements), clarifying first and second preferences as well as any "redlines";
  - Draft proposals for how the eventual coalition should be structured and which issues the agreement document should address (e.g., roles and responsibilities, dispute resolution procedures, etc.);
  - Draft proposals for the negotiation process (e.g., the structure, procedures, administrative arrangements, how external relations should be handled, etc.); and
  - Consider whether a "convener" or a formal chair is necessary.
- Identify a small negotiation team (if different from the party strategy team) that has party backing and confidence and will be respected by the other side.
- Test the waters with potential partners: remember that coalitions with like-minded partners are more likely to be successful.



## Step 2: Negotiating a Coalition

Based on the strategy that each party has prepared, parties in Step 2 come together to negotiate and hopefully reach agreement on the terms for the coalition.

- Negotiate the negotiation: clarify the rules and procedures governing the negotiation process.
- Negotiate easy items first: this will help build trust and create a positive environment.
- But apply the "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" principle.
- Document the proceedings.
- If necessary, delegate difficult technical issues to working groups.
- Use different approaches to find compromise.
- Consider different options for resolving differences, but if necessary, agree to disagree.
- Agree on procedures for coalition dispute resolution before they are needed.
- Balance the need for intraparty consultations and buy-in with the need for confidentiality.



### Step 3: Getting Started

As negotiation begins to wrap-up, the agreement between political parties needs to be finalized in writing, approved by the relevant structures of the coalition's member parties and announced to the general public.

- Outline the agreement in a written document that is detailed enough to guide the day-to-day performance of the coalition.
- Follow the rules for approval by each party.
- Communicate the approved agreement to each party's structures and members.
- Go public with the deal after party approval is final.



### Step 4: Working in Coalition

As the member parties work to implement their agreement, they will need to maintain good relations with each other. Each party will also need to strike a balance between respecting its obligations to the coalition and maintaining its individual identity.

- Pay special attention to the role of the coalition leader.
- Choose parliamentary group leaders (where applicable) carefully.
- Develop clear lines of communication.
- Use a combination of formal and informal communication channels.
- Use political advisors to facilitate communication and to help resolve low-level conflict.
- Use specialized subcommittees when needed.
- Speak to the public with one voice, but give each member opportunities to share the stage.
- Resolve disagreements behind closed doors.
- Carve out a unique space within the coalition.
- Keep some key party officials outside government.
- Keep party structures in the loop.
- Keep organizing party-specific activities.
- Continuously monitor the impact of the coalition on your party and take remedial actions if needed.



### Step 5: Drawing Lessons Learned

Regardless of whether each party plans to move forward alone or in another coalition, it is important to review and document lessons learned from each coalition-building experience.

This will make it possible to: get a clearer picture of the positive and negative impacts of coalition-building on the party; and identify lessons learned that can inform any coalition-building efforts in the near or distant future.

- Review coalition accomplishments and lessons learned.
- Engage different levels of the party in assessing the impact of the coalition on the party's profile and support, and in mapping a way forward.
- Feed lessons learned into future coalition-building efforts.

This checklist is an extract from *Coalitions: A Guide for Political Parties*. The full guide includes practical advice and tips from experienced politicians, worksheets and case studies. The National Endowment for Democracy generously provided funding for the publication. Contact us for a full copy of the guide.  
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