

Research Project „Juniors in Coalition Study” commissioned by the European Liberal Forum, with the support of Friedrich Naumann Foundation and ALDE Party

This pioneer research focused on assessments of the performance of liberal parties as junior partners in coalition governments in Norway, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The country surveys are mainly based on extensive interviews conducted in October 2016 by Uwe Johannsen, a free lance consultant from Germany, with interlocutors from liberal parties and a few external analysts from think tanks, the media and social sciences. The statements of party interlocutors reflect the internal views of a variety of current or former party leaders, a prime minister and a deputy prime minister, cabinet ministers, coalition negotiators, parliamentarians, cabinet chiefs of staff, party presidents, members of party boards, top advisors, heads of party organizations and press staff, national campaign managers. As additional sources the consultant assessed the respective coalition agreements and annexes, party documents as well as coalition-related articles and comments in the media.

Objectives

The primary ambition of this empirical study is to identify the underlying reasons for success or failure of liberal parties as junior partners in government coalitions by gathering evidences and experiences from liberal parties throughout Europe. The ultimate aim is to provide a thorough analysis of previous or current coalition experiences, in order to identify best practice examples which could make solid contributions to future coalition building efforts.

Case studies

The case studies were selected from liberal parties in different European regions covering a variety of coalition options, number of coalitions experienced over time (past and present), political and party systems, electoral legislation and political framework conditions. Three coalition options were considered: (1) Junior partner in government coalition; (2) senior partner in government coalition (mainly for comparative reasons); (3) junior partner supporting a minority government coalition from outside (via cooperation agreement).

Liberal parties in coalitions: self-identified assessment of performances, approaches and strategies

The coalition study contains the statements of party leaders and officials regarding key topics of coalitions: preparatory stage; negotiation process and coalition agreement; performance in government and coalition management; portfolios, key positions and management of key figures; organizational set-up; internal and external communication; red lines to be observed; coalition results and its impact on junior partners.

Best practices and counter-productive approaches identified in the case studies

The study discusses a large number of identified practice examples of liberal parties in coalitions regarding the range of problem-solving approaches, empirical evidence of results, pros and cons, transferability and potential alternatives on one hand and the negative consequences and implications of counter-productive practices or approaches which should be strictly avoided on the other hand. The analysis of the

referred examples of practices and approaches is done along the main topics of coalitions providing concrete recommendations how to proceed.

Key Advices from party leaders regarding coalitions

The study contains numerous personal recommendations from party leaders and high profile politicians explicitly addressing their colleagues in other liberal parties how to confront the challenges of coalition negotiation and governance. They reflect valuable personal experiences (positive and negative) in the course of long years of coalition government and coalition management.

Analysis of liberal parties in coalitions by external analysts

The study provides the assessment of liberal parties' performance and development perspectives in coalitions including advices from the interviewed external experts regarding available policy choices and suitable approaches to be adopted.

Cross-party and cross-country analysis of the researched case studies

In his overarching assessment the consultant analyses the commonalities and specifics of the liberal parties investigated, the key weaknesses and problem areas of liberal parties as juniors in coalition (in total 26), relevant internal and external factors of success or failure (in total 30) and how to cope with coalition challenges. The findings of the empirical research conducted in Norway, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom are clearly indicating that especially small liberal parties are well advised to prepare themselves at an early stage for future potential coalitions with powerful senior partners.

Recommendations of the Juniors in Coalition Study

The cross-party and cross-country analysis of the study permitted to ascertain the priority areas which liberal parties and European stakeholders should take into account when planning future activities targeting coalition building:

In order to enhance the institutional competitiveness of liberal parties regarding their prospective role as junior partners in coalition governments and significantly improve election results *the future key priority areas of actions should be: (1) Strengthening and professionalization of party structures at headquarters and branch offices with a special focus on confronting the challenges of coalition government. (2) Preparation of high profile candidates for future parliamentary and executive positions in coalition governments. (3) Providing coalition-specific party capacities regarding preparation, negotiation and implementation of future coalitions of junior partners. (4) Elaboration and implementation of effective media strategies and their successful implementation even under the restrictions of senior coalition partners (including messaging, social media and online networking). (5) Rapid response and crisis management applied to coalition governance. (6) Voter-centered design of professional election campaign strategies and election campaign plans under the conditions of junior coalition partners, creation of core competence campaign teams (including public opinion research and gathering of specific voter data).*

Key priority should be given to targeted institution building projects through capacity building and consulting suited to change institutional and organizational party structures and to establish new professional tools, instruments and methodologies, always complemented by on-the-job-trainings for staff and political advisors and special coalition exchange programs for high profile politicians of several liberal parties in Europe.