

Written summary of the contribution on ELF's event
„Train the coalition Managers“
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Opatija / Croatia

Key concepts of coalitions

Advantages and disadvantages of coalition building

Five steps in coalition building

Talking about my very practical view on coalition-building and coalition management I should first of all make very clear that my own practical experience is based on my work in a framework of a parliamentary system in the Federal Republic of Germany with an electoral system that is based on proportional representation. I have dealt however with other frameworks and I will try to make some general remarks that can be probably helpful for other constitutional and electoral laws as well.

One of the arguments against coalition governments in general is that coalitions are not as stable as one-party-governments. Germany is an example that this is not necessarily the case. In our post-war history we have almost all the time had coalition governments, all kinds of constellations, excluding only the post-communists and the Neo-Nazis or right wing extremists. And Germany's development after the war was indeed very stable and very good. It has been said that the need to form a coalition government has had a moderating influence on Germany's policies and did indeed have an impact on a very favourable economical development.

Having negotiated coalition contracts in some Federal States of Germany and also on the National level and having worked with these contracts also on State level and on the National level and also having dealt with problematic constructions in other countries as a consultant there are some general guidelines that should help to come to a stable and functioning coalition government formed out of more than one party.

In general one can say that in most of the coalitions that run into trouble during an electoral period the mistakes have been made at the very beginning. Ailing coalitions have very often been formed hastily, without a negotiation period that is sufficient to set up a detailed agenda, very often not foreseeing that problems and conflicts will not occur one day after the election but probably in a year or two.

Over the decades we have developed certain unwritten rules for coalition building and coalition management that are obeyed by all parties intending to not only form a coalition government, but to keep it running through a whole electoral period if ever possible.

First of all we negotiate a very detailed governmental programme, a catalogue of all kinds of legislation that we intend to do together. This is a very long list, on the Federal level a book like a telephone directory of Berlin, more than two hundred pages. Once it is completed it is signed, like a contract by the party leaders, the floor leaders, the secretary generals and the chief whips of every coalition partner. Sometimes this is even done in public to make it a more formal procedure. The

agreement, in most cases the full catalogue is immediately published and available to everybody in the internet. Thus it is binding for every coalition partner, the big one and the small one. The reason for this work in detail is that in a parliamentary system particularly the smaller partner is in danger of getting marginalised after having voted for the prime minister in parliament. This procedure guarantees that the issues agreed on will be brought on the parliamentary agenda by all of the coalition partners jointly. This fixed, detailed and formalized contract is the basis for governmental and parliamentary work.

But a legislative period is long. So how are we handling issues that come up later and were not visible in the very beginning. We need to make arrangements for that situation, too, since it will definitely happen. Our solution is simple. We agree on the consensus principle. No agreement – no changes, i.e. a force towards consensus or deal-making within the coalition.

Above all this only works with a general agreement which we always install. And that is "No dissenting voting" (neither in plenary nor in committees); coalition will always vote together. This clause is always essential and fixed in the coalition contract.

It is also important to agree on a conflict solution mechanism in the very beginning, possibly when no conflicts are around. It is too late to try to install it once a conflict is in the air. This conflict solution mechanisms within the coalition on a day-to-day basis include different levels of consultation where consensus can be reached. If no consensus is achieved the issue is shifted to the next higher level. On the top level the decisions can also (by consensus) be "political solutions" according to the situation (that means political deal-making).

It is also essential to install levels of formal communication within the coalition. There should be a parallel structures of work within the parliamentary groups (i.e. parliamentary groups work independently, there is for instance no such thing as a joint session of the parliamentary groups of the coalition).

The coalition working groups meet on a regular basis (jour fix) prior to the respective meetings of the legislative bodies (e.g. one day before committee, plenary etc.)

Committee level:

Joint working group of coalition members for every committee; meets 1 day before committee and before respective parliamentary group meeting.

Plenary:

Floor leaders and whips of coalition partners meet before respective parliamentary groups meet and at least one day before plenary for consultation on the agenda of the plenary

"Coalition Round" (top level)

party chairmen, Secretary Generals of coalition parties, floor leaders and whips, Prime Minister and one Member Of Government of each coalition party meet weekly to prepare and consult on the work of government and parliament

These communicative instruments should not be underestimated. As I said: in most cases ailing coalitions suffer from a lack of preparations in the beginning. But the second most reason for problems is insufficient communication between the coalition partners and/or between the

government and the coalition partners. So levels of communication should be institutionalized and should be maintained throughout the whole electoral period.

The third most important factor of problems within coalitions, although not very often admitted, is the human factors. We must not forget. These are persons, individuals that need to work together and communicate for a long time despite of the fact that they remain competitors. Coalitions are not marriages; the partners will continue to strive for a better result at the next election, to have an advantage against the opposition, but also against the coalition partners.

So this set of formalities must be completed by informal but most important permanent communications amongst the leaders of the coalition. In my case this was between the floor-leaders and the chief whips.

My very personal experience: me (being chief whip of the liberal party) and my colleague, the chief whip of the Conservative coalition partners would telephone practically daily to keep us updated, to ask the opinion of the partner on issues that just might come up in the future. We would meet sometimes, no agenda, no formalities, just for a coffee or – being German – for a beer preferably.

It sounds strange but this informal consultation was kind of an early warning system for possible problems in the future. We worked so intense together that we really became friends. We addressed ourselves as "Mr. Fire Chief" since we were always called when somewhere a firefighter was needed for the coalition. And we trusted one another, spoke frankly, knowing that this would not be in the paper the next day. We both were sure that we were caring about this alliance, wanted it to last the whole period. And we succeeded.

By the way: our coalition is over, we are both working in different positions, but we are still in friendly contact. Everyone is – of course – working for the success of his own party now. We are in opposition and his party is in a different coalition. But our coalition in those days, as long as it lasted, was successful.

Success of coalition work is not coincidence. It can be planned, it has to be organised. Still there is no guarantee for success. But the odds are much better when we obey certain unwritten rules, if we take time to prepare and if we care about consultation and communication.

So – as a practitioner of coalition building and coalition management – I am not talking about a "Harry Potter"- kind of business but rather about a certain craftsmanship.

Craftsmanship that can be learned, that has to be adjusted to the particular needs in specific conditions, but that is always worth while.

General agreement:

No dissenting voting (neither in plenary nor in committees; coalition will always vote together)

Coalition contract

A fixed, detailed and formalized (signatures of party chairmen as well as floor leaders of every coalition partner) contract is the basis for governmental and political work.

"New issues"

(issues that have not been fixed in the contract because they were not on the agenda at that time) can only be fixed on the basis of consensus.

No agreement - no changes, i.e. a force towards consensus or deal-making within the coalition.

Conflict solution mechanisms within the coalition on a day-to-day basis

Different levels of consultation where consensus can be reached.

If no consensus is achieved the issue is shifted to the next higher level

On the top level the decisions can also (by consensus) be "political solutions" according to the situation

Levels of formal communication within the coalition is a parallel structure to the work within the parliamentary group (i.e. parliamentary groups work independently, there is for instance no such thing as a joint session of the parliamentary groups of the coalition).

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"Coalition Round" (top level)

party chairmen, Secretary Generals of coalition parties, floor leaders and whips, Prime Minister and one Member Of Government of each coalition party meet weekly to prepare and consult on the work of government and parliament

Five steps to coalition building

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?

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.*
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- 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.