



Joining Forces: A Guide for Forming, Joining and Building Political Coalitions

Introduction

Many political parties and organizations find coalitions to be an important and useful way to increase power and stretch resources. At the same time, coalitions can often be hard to form and difficult to hold together. This document presents the political considerations of coalition building. Political parties and organizations should use this paper as a tool for exploring the various issues that may arise when joining forces with others. While there are many types of coalitions the focus here is the development of coalitions for political purposes.

The guide will not tell you how to form your coalition and will not serve as a rigid structure for all types of coalitions. Rather it will offer a series of pointed questions that political parties and organizations should think about as they consider joining in coalition with like minded parties and organizations.

By thinking through the process and answering the *Coalition Questions* in the boxes as truthfully as possible you will be better prepared to work with other political actors to further your agenda and reach your political goals.

The points that will be covered here include:

- What is a coalition?
- Why build a coalition?
- Three Resources in Politics
- Types of Coalitions
- Levels of Participation in Political Coalitions
- Advantages to Building or Joining A Coalition
- Disadvantages to Building or Joining A Coalition
- Successful Coalitions
- Challenges Facing Coalitions
- Questions to Consider
- Maintaining the Coalition

What is a coalition?

A coalition is usually a temporary union between two or more groups, especially political parties, for the purpose of gaining more influence or power than the individual groups or parties can hope to achieve on their own. By focusing on their common objectives and goals, all of the member groups can build their strength and get an advantage on issues of common interest. With a particular objective in mind – winning an election, passing a particular piece of legislation, or forming a government – coalitions have a limited life span until the objectives are achieved.

All of the partners should feel as though they are winning or getting something out of the coalition – a win/win situation.

Why build a coalition?

The primary reason for forming, joining or building a coalition is to gain more influence and power than the individual organization has on its own. This can be done by combining votes in an elected body or by combining resources during a political or civic campaign. Working together, the groups or parties are able to accomplish more together than they would on their own.

Parties and organizations need to have a clear objective for forming a coalition. A coalition that comes together during a campaign to win an election has a different objective than a coalition that comes together after an election to form a government. In some cases the coalition is the same but the objective is still different.

There are many issues that should be thought about when considering forming or joining a coalition. These may include better research, sharing information, mobilizing supporters, informing the public, advocate on an issue, raise money, organize against a stronger force, and gain power. Not every coalition will do every one of these things but they should at least consider them and decide what makes sense for them.

Coalition Questions

List all the reasons for joining a coalition:

- *What is the overall objective of the coalition?*
- *Will coalition members share research and information?*
- *Will the coalition primarily inform the public?*
- *Will the coalition mobilize supporters?*
- *Will the coalition campaign on a particular issue?*
- *How will the coalition raise money?*
- *Will the coalition help the individual members achieve power?*
- *How will leadership work together?*
- *Will members of the coalition add something to the group?*

The Three Resources in Politics

In politics there are three resources at your disposal – time, money and people. It is essential to determine how much of each of the resources each of the coalition members can provide and then budget them in the most overall effective way to benefit everyone in the coalition. It is also important to develop methods to determine whether or not the coalition partners are living up to their commitment of resources.

- **Time** – the limited period between now and the election or legislative vote. Wasting time or not using it efficiently is wasting a valuable resource just as serious as throwing away money. Planning and scheduling are critical to make sure time is not wasted.
- **Money** – the cost in currency to accomplish the campaign goal. A realistic budget and fundraising plan are necessary in meeting the cost objectives.
- **People** – the staff and volunteers needed to implement the plan and meet the objectives. It is important to recruit good staff and volunteers and use them effectively.

Coalition Questions

Determine the resources needed to maintain the coalition and who will provide what:

- *How much time, money and people will be required?*
- *What resources will each partner raise or otherwise provide?*
- *How will resources be monitored?*
- *How many people will be needed to accomplish the coalition goal?*
- *What skills will be necessary and who will provide them?*

Types of Coalitions

There are different types of coalitions that can play a role in politics:

- **Coalitions between two or more political parties** – political parties may agree to work together in order to maximize their gains in upcoming elections or strengthen themselves in the legislative area.
- **Coalitions between elected officials** – elected officials may agree to work together or at the least not oppose one another for mutual benefit. These coalitions may be blocs of political parties in a legislative body or they may be politicians from a particular region that agree to work together toward a certain goal.
- **Coalitions between a political party and civic organizations** – civic organizations may form coalitions with political parties in order to assist the political party and advance their particular agenda.
- **Coalitions between civic organizations** – civic organizations may agree to combine forces in the political arena in order to affect the outcome of an election or vote on a particular piece of legislation.

Coalition Questions

Determine what type of coalition will be formed:

- *Will this be a coalition between political parties?*
- *Will this be a coalition between elected officials?*
- *Will this be a coalition between a political party and civic organizations?*
- *Will this be a coalition between civic organizations?*

Levels of Participation in Political Coalitions

Political parties and civic groups must determine how much cooperation they will agree to in forming a coalition. The following areas move from the easiest to accomplish to the more difficult:

- **Agree not to compete** – the political parties and candidates may decide that they will just not compete for the same seats or in the same areas. They may also decide that they will not vote against each other's legislation. This type of cooperation may be public and known to everyone or quiet and kept out of the public's view.
- **Join forces in name** – political parties and organizations may declare publicly that they support each other's agenda. This may not require that they work together or share resources beyond the visible show of support.
- **Work together as candidates** – candidates share information and efforts in support of each other.
- **Share resources** – candidates or political parties combine their resources to defeat another candidate, party or coalition.

Coalition Questions

Determine the level of participation for your party or organization.

- *What will be the level of participation each political party or organization will have in the coalition?*
- *What is your group unwilling to share?*
- *What does your organization need the most?*
- *What can you share the most of?*

Advantages to Building or Joining a Coalition

There are various potential advantages for political parties and organizations in joining coalitions.

- By combining forces coalitions allow organizations or parties to gain something that they could not gain on their own.
- By gaining influence or power, coalitions provide groups or parties with tangible results that they could not accomplish on their own.

- Coalitions can provide the member groups or parties with ways to build their organizations and broaden their base of support.
- Member organizations of a coalition can focus on their strengths while relying on the strengths of coalition partners in other areas and still share in the accomplishments with the other members.
- Partners in a coalition are able to learn from other organizations and acquire new skills. By combining efforts and sharing experiences members of the coalition can broaden their knowledge and abilities.
- Shared resources often mean that the coalition can overcome deficiencies. The sum is often greater than the parts.
- Increased numbers – more people – can overcome deficits in time and money. More people may mean that it will take less time to accomplish an objective and could cost less with more volunteer effort.
- Different parties or partners can provide diversity to the organization. Parties of largely one ethnic background may broaden their appeal by including other parties or organizations from other ethnic groups or a party may strengthen its position by working with an organization associated with a particular issue or cause.

Coalition Questions

Determine the goal of the coalition:

- *What will the partners gain?*
- *How will the coalition help build the individual organizations?*
- *What skills will the partners contribute and what skills will they learn?*
- *Will the coalition achieve power?*
- *What can you save by joining together?*

Disadvantages to Building or Joining a Coalition

There are potential disadvantages to joining a coalition that should be considered:

- In order to find common ground with other members of a coalition, the group or party may have to compromise on priorities or principle. The benefits of compromise must outweigh the losses.
- By joining a coalition, the group or party loses some control over the message and tactical decisions. They may also lose their individual identities or names in the election period. This can lead to disagreements or squabbling between the coalition members and within the member organization.
- By associating with other members of the coalition, the group or party may also be associated with the negative aspects of those other members.

Coalition Questions

Determine what disadvantages need to be considered:

- *What compromises will need to be made?*
- *What control will be given up?*
- *What negative aspects should be considered?*
- *How will your membership handle these downsides?*
- *How will decisions be made?*

Challenges Facing Coalitions

In joining or forming a coalition, there are a number of challenges that must be considered and overcome. These may include some of the following:

- **Focus, objectives and limits** – coalition partners often fail to agree on the common objectives, either through omission – they just never discuss the objectives – or through poor communication – one member has one idea and another member has a different idea. Failure to develop a clear focus and set realistic objectives on what the coalition will deal with can cause the disagreements and splits in the coalition.
- **Motivation** – coalition partners with different reasons for belonging to a coalition or different levels of motivation can cause discontent between partners. They may be working toward different goals or some partners may coast while more motivated partners do most of the hard work.
- **Decision making authority** – there needs to be a clear understanding of how decisions in the coalition will be made and which partners will control which resources.
- **Dispute resolution mechanisms** – partners need to have a clear and accepted method of resolving conflicts within the coalition set up in advance of any potential problems.
- **Maintaining trust** – coalition partners need to believe that all members of the coalition are being open and forthright in their agreements and dealings within the coalition. Suspicion that one or more of the partners is not living up to their commitments, even if unfounded, can wreck a coalition. To avoid this sort of suspicion creeping into the workings of the coalition it is important to develop open and transparent procedures.
- **Shared workload** – coalition partners need to have a sense that all the members are doing their fair share of the work and contributing what is expected of them to achieve the coalition's goal.
- **Weak links** – As with any organization, there are going to be weaknesses within the coalition. Because coalitions are combined efforts, these weaknesses may come primarily from one partner. It is important that these weaknesses be made clear at the beginning so that ways to overcome them or work around them can be found.

- **Communication** – coalition partners need to develop clear and workable lines of communication between partners and with the public.
- **Credit and visibility** – coalition partners need to feel that they are receiving the credit and the visibility they deserve. In some cases, partners may want to remain anonymous or behind the scenes but in most cases partners will want to be acknowledged for the contribution they have made.
- **Avoid conflicting priorities** – different coalition partners may have different priorities within the coalition. Sometimes these priorities may be inconsistent or even opposed to each other. It is important that all partners share the priorities of the coalition as a whole and agree to work toward the shared goal.
- **Hidden agendas** – coalition partners need to be clear about what they hope to get out of the coalition and not have priorities that are unknown to the other partners.

Coalition Questions

Determine what challenges need to be considered:

- *Which challenges are more likely?*
- *Where will the challenges come from?*
- *Can you plan to avoid these problems?*
- *How will your organization overcome these challenges?*

Successful Coalitions

There are a number of points to consider that make it more likely that the coalition will stick together and accomplish the objectives.

- Determine a **clear objective** for the coalition and what the common ground will be. It is important to focus on the points where the members of the coalition can agree and avoid points where disagreement will waste time. It is not important that the members agree on every issue but that they find at least one or two issues that are important enough for them to focus their energies.
- Make sure that all the members of the coalition receive some **equitable benefit** from the coalition. It is important that all members feel that they are gaining in power or influence from the coalition. If a member organization feels that it is not receiving its fair share of the benefits from the coalition, it will see its interests are better served by dropping out of the coalition.
- **Agree to disagree.** Members of the coalition will not agree on all issues (if they did, they should become a single party or group). There may be topics which are off limits to discussion in order to avoid conflict or issues where the coalition partners decide that they will not agree on but the disagreement will not impede on the common objectives.
- Be willing to **compromise**. In order to find common ground with coalition partners, member groups will have to be flexible and may have to give in on certain issues to reach a consensus.

- Be able to **negotiate** or give and take to receive what the party or organization wants in exchange for a lesser priority.
- **Decision makers** for each group must negotiate. Representatives of the organizations must be in a position to make decisions for their group and implement the agreements.
- There must be **trust and cooperation** between the partners. Member organizations have to believe that others in the coalition are honest and working fairly with the partners.
- **Respect** the interests of the partners. Respect positions, difficulties, strengths and weaknesses of member organizations. Each organization contributes a unique experience, structure, program, values and leadership qualities to the coalition. It is important to secure mutual understanding between the members of the coalition to reach the common advantage.
- Determine a **clear understanding** of the role, as well as the responsibilities, each member of the coalition will have within the coalition. Once the common ground has been agreed upon, it is important that all the members understand what is expected of them as members of the coalition. This may require clear planning with members dividing the various tasks and concentrating their resources.
- Achieve **tangible results**. Coalitions must achieve results that are clear to the member organizations and the public. They must not only achieve these goals but they must be able to clearly demonstrate their achievements. In some cases winning on an issue may be a success and in other cases blocking someone else from winning may be a success.

Questions to Consider

- **Formal Documentation** – will the coalition become a legal, independent body that requires legal documents? Do the partners want to draw up some sort of formal agreement or letter of understanding that outlines the limits and objectives of the coalition?
- **Written values, priorities and principles** – “**sign on**” – will there be a document drawn up that outlines the values, priorities and principles of the coalition, something that the partners will agree to or “sign on” to join the coalition?
- **Publicity** – will the coalition seek publicity and how do the partners want the coalition presented to a wider audience? Is there a media plan and who will be responsible for implementing it?
- **Staff** – will the coalition require permanent staff and organizational structure?

Coalition Questions

Other issues that coalitions should consider:

- *Does the coalition need to develop legal documents?*
- *Do the coalition partners want to develop a written document outlining values, priorities and principles that members will agree to and sign on to?*
- *Does the coalition want publicity and who will be responsible for speaking for the coalition?*
- *Will the coalition hire staff and develop a permanent organizational structure?*

Once Formed – Maintaining the Coalition

Once the partners have agreed to form a coalition and come to an agreement about all the various aspects of the coalition, the hard part is maintaining the coalition and making it work so that it achieves its goals and is a win/win for everyone involved.

- **Maintain Trust** – Keep the philosophy of the organization but be sensitive to others in the coalition to build and maintain the trust between organizations. Organizations may need to develop confidence building measures or at the very least ways to check on partner confidence to make sure that once the original euphoria is past the partners continue to see the benefits and continue to work together.
- **Decision Maker Meetings** – Decision makers within the group will need to have agreed upon meetings to maintain communication and resolve any differences that may arise.
- **Internal Communication** – Partners will need to maintain communication between partners and within parties.
- **External Communication** – Partners will need to maintain agreed upon procedures for dealing with the public and the press.

Coalition Questions

Determine what mechanisms need to be in place to maintain and build the coalition:

- *What confidence building measures need to be in place to maintain trust?*
- *Which decision makers will need to meet set priorities and resolve conflicts?*
- *What internal communication procedures need to be developed to maintain communication between the partners?*
- *What procedures need to be developed concerning external communication?*

Conclusion

Hopefully if you have worked through this document and answered the questions to the best of your ability you will have a better idea of the benefits and potential pitfalls of forming a coalition. By taking the time now to think through the process in an organized manner your party or organization will be better prepared to build a strong coalition. A strong coalition will benefit all the partners. By taking the time now to lay a strong foundation the coalition you form will stand a better chance of achieving the objectives and surviving future challenges. A strong coalition will continue to win victories.

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