BEYOND POLARIZATION

Collaboration and Dialogue for Political Parties

NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE

About the National Democratic Institute

NDI is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms and values to secure a better quality of life for all. NDI envisions aworld where democracy and freedom prevail, with dignity for all. NDI works with political parties, civic groups, parliaments, and other organizations and individuals in more than 60 countries to strengthen democratic institutions, safeguard elections, advance citizen engagement, and promote open and accountable government. We establish trusted relationships with our partners and these relationships set us apart from other groups and give us a key, competitive advantage. NDI operates in the belief that a more democratic world is a more peaceful and prosperous place.

Acknowledgments

FOREWORD

Democratic political parties are in the midst of a perfect storm of polarization, extremism and authoritarianism. Authoritarian political parties, governments and leaders are on the rise. Corruption, indifference to voter, opaque party organizations have undermined public confidence in political parties, fueling democratic instability and weakening global institutions.

Crossparty-collaboration between democratic parties is not about having the same opinion about everything from levels of taxation to welfare. But for parties that authentically believe in democracy, there is a huge difference between healthy competition with tough debates about issues and destructive polarization challenging the very concept of democracy itself. This is the paradox of tolerance, and in our lively debates on policy, we must never debate our right to debate - free and fair elections are not negotiable. Respecting the rule of law, freedom of speech and democracy are not debate topics similar to housing regulations or even defense spending. True believers in our democratic system know this to be true.

Populists, authoritarians and polarizing forces are thriving because democratic political parties are failing to unite, and are too weak to protect the core values of the democratic process. Traditional parties have become kidnapped by charlatan reformers in century-old democracies. Both new and old parties have jumped on the populist train — or joined coalitions far from their political roots — just to gain power.

But the recipe is not to give up on political parties. Parties in a multiparty system, operating under free and fair elections, are the backbone of democracy. When they work best, political parties are the connective tissue between voters and political leaders, strengthening the voice of the one into many in order to make a change and drive policy. Fully democratic and functioning political parties are a fundamental organizing component in every successful democracy.
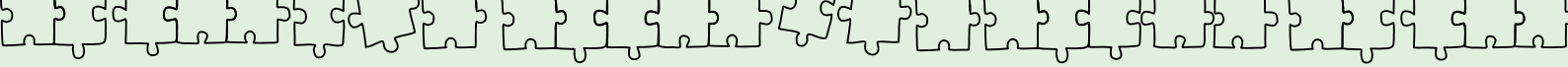
Democracy can never blossom in a society without solid democratic political parties. Depolarizing the political debate, and strengthening democratic political parties in new, old and aspiring democracies will be a central component at the heart of their success. Investing in the creation of democratic political parties — no matter their ideology — must be a top priority of every democracy.

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Democracy is founded on the spirit of political competition. Healthy competition among political parties is central to democracy because they mobilize voters across diverse ideas and values within society. Within these diverse ideas and values cross-party collaboration is vital to support strong democracy and provide solutions to challenges within the countries. However, when political parties and society fragment along divisive lines **political polarization** — the divergence of political attitudes from the center — can make collaboration and compromise difficult or nearly impossible.

In recent decades, the world has witnessed a shift in political competition, with political attitudes increasingly leaning toward ideological extremes. Some scholars have labeled this development "pernicious polarization,"[1] where political difference transforms into social difference and political discourse breaks down into an "us" vs. "them" dynamic.[2] Deep polarization and the rise of populism have precipitated the formation of different political and social groups who have become increasingly antagonistic toward one another rather than coexisting as a whole.

Pernicious polarization has been on the rise globally for decades, incentivizing certain groups to undermine democratic institutions for their own political gain, worsening the global trend of democratic decline. Extreme polarization can take on many forms and has severe political ramifications. For example, partisan gridlocks occur when political parties become increasingly entrenched in their positions, leading to legislative stalemates stalling crucial legislation indefinitely.[3] Polarization's impact may also be seen in the form of decreasingly pluralistic political climates, increasing hate speech, legislative filibusters and boycotts, inability to form democratic coalition governments, government shutdowns, manipulation of electoral district boundaries, and violence against women in politics. Indefinite political stalemates lead to ineffective governance and erodes democracy.

Polarization can also impact social cohesion, most clearly seen in media outlets catering to specific ideological or partisan audiences, amplifying divisive polarizing narratives and reinforcing existing biases. Social media and information manipulation only furthers this dilemma by contributing to the creation of "echo chambers" where individuals are exposed only to information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, further deepening divisions.[4] In the most perniciously polarized environments, the social unrest generated by these factors can have devastating impacts including violent conflict, human rights violations (particularly for women, LGBTQI+ and other historically marginalized and vulnerable groups), the loss of economic investments, weakening democratic institutions and increased risk of authoritarianism.
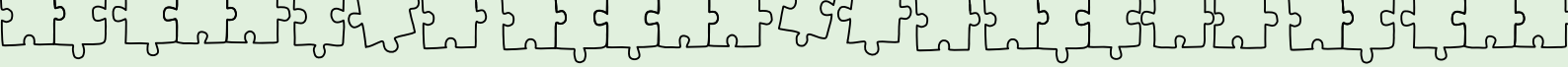
Illiberal actors thrive in polarized political environments. By sowing mistrust in institutions, political parties, and fellow citizens through political rhetoric, they both increase the resonance of their messaging in order to win political office and build public support for the erosion of institutional checks and balances. If left unchallenged, these efforts will leave governments vulnerable to authoritarianism and constrict the space for citizens to exercise their political rights, and for political parties to compete, hold office and deliver on democratic promises.

[1] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316
[2] What Happens When Democracies Become Perniciously Polarized? - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
[3] Party Polarization and Legislative Gridlock
[4] Political polarization and its echo chambers: Surprising new, cross-disciplinary perspectives from Princeton

The rise of populism over the past decades fuels and exacerbates polarization. Authoritarian leaning and populist leaders employ populist rhetoric to exacerbate societal divides eroding trust in political parties and democracy as a whole. These actors also find influence and use pre-existing divisions to further consolidate their power and rhetoric with certain groups of citizens. They vilify compromise, label opponents or others as enemies, and perpetuate the narrative of the oppressed versus the oppressors. Populism and polarization are often experienced in tandem as illiberal actors utilize the two together to gain influence and power.

Drivers of Polarization

Polarization is a global phenomenon, presenting itself in a variety of ways in all countries. It can appear differently depending on the country context and political and social dynamics inside the country. While there are many drivers of polarization, it often emerges as elite-driven or mass-driven. The term elite refers to people in power or influential positions throughout this guidance document.

Elite-driven polarization occurs when people with power, influence, and resources (political, economic, media) resort to divisive strategies in order to energize a voter base or articulate differences between political groups. This materializes when parties use polarizing strategies to demonize an out-group.[5] Elite-driven polarization is seen when politicians employ aggressive rhetoric targeting specific populations with the aim to stoke public resentment from the rest of the population, such as minorities, immigrants, or warring factions. This often leads to distrust and bitterness of a certain population past the conflict or crisis.

In contrast, **mass-driven polarization** flows from the bottom up, as the population at large begins to divide itself along social, religious, ethnic or political lines. This is often seen in countries where there are multiple religions or ethnicities that vie for power and influence, especially after a civil war. In this context, religious/ethnic/social identities become politicized and political parties begin to mobilize along these lines which further deepens differences among these groups and leave the political landscape fractured.

Of course, the distinction between mass and elite-driven polarization is purely theoretical and most cases are a product of interactions between the two drivers. For example, while the ethnic divisions in a country are pre-existing, many political leaders focus on grievances and historical narratives that stoke fear and distrust between ethnic groups. This strengthens their grip on power by consolidating their own ethnic base. And in some countries, although elite discourse played a large role in the polarization of the country, much of the division is due to deep-seated social and economic inequalities that resonate with the public who, as a consequence, feel a sense of marginalization and resentment. Illiberal leaders who use polarizing rhetoric may sometimes target groups they themselves belong to, such as elites attacking other elites. Often these populist leaders while members of the group they are targeting use polarization to support their narratives to gain influence. People in power then respond with populist rhetoric that exploits these grievances via a simplistic narrative of "us" vs. "them" and demonizes those of opposing viewpoints.

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5 Comparing Polarizing Issues in Asian and African Democracies: Voter Confidence, Electoral Reform, and Polarization in Taiwan and Kenya

Axis of Polarization: Issue vs. Identity

Another key lens for understanding polarization is the **issue vs. identity axis**. In most countries, polarization initially emerges over a discrete issue: for example, how to structure a political institution or what fiscal policy to adopt or how to navigate relationships with foreign relations that heavily influence domestic politics. This is an example of **issue-based polarization**.

However, as political pressures increase and issue-based divides increasingly align with partisan divides, adherence to those beliefs can become a marker of identity and thereby create an in-group (i.e., you agree with me and therefore are my ally) and an out-group (i.e., you disagree with me and therefore are my adversary). This is called **identity-based polarization**.

Alternatively, identity-based polarization can emerge if political leaders make appeals to particular pre-existing identities (based on religion, ethnicity, geography, class or otherwise). Since most people view identity as fixed and therefore impossible to compromise on, identity-based polarization is especially difficult to overcome. In countries where ideologies do not exist or are played down drastically, illiberal leaders will use this vacuum to polarize the society.

Spectrum of Polarization: Mild to Pernicious

Polarization exists along a spectrum and varies from country to country. In some, levels of political polarization are extremely low. Political parties in these countries are still able to regularly collaborate in government. In other countries, however, political differences become social differences and society becomes divided into an "us" and a "them." When countries reach this level of polarization, they are "**perniciously polarized**".[6] While the drivers of polarization in each of these cases are very different, the logic of pernicious polarization holds: in each, members of the group in power view the stakes of politics as existential and, in order to advantage the "us," attack democratic institutions and norms. In 75% of cases[7] when a democracy became perniciously polarized, it backslid into autocracy.

Polarization is a global phenomenon affecting most countries in the world today at some level. Even less polarized countries struggle to unite on common challenges to democracy, such as migration. In any level of polarized societies cross-party collaboration and dialogue is crucial for political parties to work together and deliver on democracy.

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[6] Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies
[7] https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/what-happens-when-democracies-become-perniciously-polarized-pub-86190

Importance of Cross-Party Collaboration

When faced with the complex challenges that polarization poses to democracy and states, it is critical that political parties band together in an effort to combat these divisions. As the aggregators of political views in a country, political parties play a vital role in mitigating the detrimental impacts of political polarization and the most effective mechanism for them to do so is via cross-party collaboration. **Cross-party collaboration**[8] involves individuals from various political backgrounds working together on shared goals or issues, despite their ideological differences or party affiliations. Collaboration can be informally or formally executed among party members, and often will include a mix of both depending on the time and issues under discussion. Cross-party collaboration addresses many of the challenges and root causes of political polarization through:

1. Open Lines of Communication:

Cross-party collaboration creates opportunities for discussions and open lines of communication around simple or personal topics. Through informal and formal communication parties can begin to develop relationships and build trust with counterparts in other parties, so when complex challenges and issues arise they have a framework of communication to initiate cross party collaboration.

2. Finding Common Ground:

Through collaboration, politicians often identify common ground where they can agree on policy objectives or approaches. Identifying shared values or priorities can help bridge ideological differences and reduce polarization.

3. Reducing Animosity:

In polarized environments, politicians and their supporters often demonize those from opposing parties, portraying them as enemies rather than fellow citizens with differing viewpoints. Cross-party collaboration humanizes political opponents and challenges this us-versus-them mentality.[9] It can also minimize hostility that may be perceived from one party or another.

4. Addressing Complex Challenges:

Many of the most pressing issues facing societies today are complex and multifaceted, requiring solutions that transcend partisan boundaries. Cross-party collaboration enables politicians to tackle these challenges more effectively by drawing on diverse perspectives and expertise.[10] Parties tend to share power more regularly to address these complex issues.

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[8] Defending Democracy with Political Party Network Collaboration | National Democratic Institute
[9] https://polisci.colostate.edu/2023/05/we-need-to-talk-how-cross-party-dialogue-reduces-affective-polarization/
[10] https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2022/03/how-cross-branch-collaboration-helps-states-strengthen-evidence-based-policymaking (specific to US)

5. Reduced Political Gridlock:

By transcending party lines, politicians can streamline the legislative process, leading to greater efficiency in passing legislation and addressing pressing issues more promptly.[11] Political parties may also choose to submit joint policies to the legislative, strengthening support for policy measures in government when multiple parties were part of the drafting and submission process. This can lead to harmonious and collaborative governance and provide effective, faster, and responsible solutions to common challenges.

6. Social Cohesion and Unity:

By working together despite ideological differences, political leaders can set an example of cooperation and unity, fostering a sense of national cohesion and solidarity among citizens. Parties often develop united fronts on different issues through cooperation, such as responding to natural disasters, instead of fighting amongst each other.

7. Inclusive Decision Making:

By fostering, collaboration and cooperation, parties are more likely to engage with groups traditionally left out of decision making such as women, LGBTQI+, youth, and other marginalized groups.

8. Deeper Transparency and Accountability:

Parties who communicate and collaborate often become more transparent and accountable to democratic processes. Through open communication, parties are able to hold each accountable and monitor decision making more clearly.

9. Capacity Building:

Cross-party collaboration allows parties to pool resources together to solve issues and brings together individuals to help strengthen their capacities to be more successful within their individual parties.

10. Leveraging Diverse Expertise:

Political parties are able to leverage resources and expertise from other parties when collaborating. This can be especially important when one party has more expertise on a certain issue, or has more capacity capabilities.

11. Clearer Understanding of Issues:

Parties in collaboration will have the opportunity to hold conversations to better understand each other's positions and discuss the complex issues in greater length. This leaves the groups with less room for misunderstandings and helps to assuage any potential influence of information manipulation.

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[11] https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/stable/27552366 (specific to foreign policy issues gridlocks but still a god analysis)

Challenges to Cross-Party Collaboration

Although cross-party collaboration is an effective tool to combat polarization, there are barriers to that collaboration that must be addressed.

1. Partisan Divide:

Collaboration between a ruling party and the opposition party can be seen as politically risky or detrimental to party interests, especially in highly polarized environments where cooperation with rival parties may be viewed negatively by constituents or party leadership. Fear of backlash, reprisal, or losing support from voters can deter politicians from reaching across party lines. Additionally, if two large parties join together, this could foster resentment from smaller parties or create more radical, populist parties who contribute further into deepening the polarized society and destabilizing democracy.

2. Ideological and Strategic Differences:

It can be difficult to overcome ideological differences and approaches to problem solving and policy making. Additionally, parties may disagree on priorities and strategies based on their divergent party perspectives.

3. Unequal Capacities:

Different political parties may have unequal resources or capabilities, whether financially, organizationally or in terms of expertise. This inequality can create barriers to effective collaboration, as parties with fewer resources may struggle to participate meaningfully.

4. Geographical Accessibility:

Geographic disparities, particularly between urban and rural areas, can pose challenges to cross-party collaboration. While it may be easier for politicians from urban areas to convene and collaborate, those from rural areas may face obstacles such as limited transportation options or the cost of travel, making it difficult for them to participate in collaborative efforts in-person.

5. Communication Barriers:

Communication breakdowns, whether due to technological limitations, language barriers or differences in communication styles, can impede effective collaboration between parties. Political parties should ensure clear communication not only internally between parties, but also externally with the public to minimize misunderstandings and misinterpretations which can lead to breakdowns in dialogue. Ensuring clear and accessible communication channels is essential for fostering cooperation.

6. Lack of Trust:

Deep-seated mistrust between parties, whether stemming from historical grievances, ideological differences or partisan politics, can undermine efforts to collaborate. Parties may fear the other will quickly accuse or blame another party for a problem in the country and therefore be hesitant to collaborate. In addition, not maintaining confidentiality when discussions are occurring behind closed doors, or negotiations are taking place could lead to collaboration breakdown. Building trust through transparent communication and demonstrated commitment to shared goals is essential for overcoming this challenge. Parties should value and ensure confidentiality is maintained throughout the collaboration process.

7. Lack of Inclusivity:

Exclusionary practices within political parties or institutional processes may marginalize certain groups or perspectives, hindering their participation in cross-party collaboration efforts. Promoting inclusivity and ensuring that all voices are heard and represented is essential for fostering effective collaboration across party lines.

8. Dominance of One Party or Individual:

Especially for smaller parties, the dominance of one political party or one (or few) individuals from parties in cross-party collaboration is a concern to starting to cooperate. Personality conflicts may also influence the success of collaboration. There are always incentives for all parties to participate, and parties will need to ensure these are clear when coming together. Everyone should win in cross-party collaboration.

Collaboration in the context of polarization is a difficult task, but if each of these challenges are addressed proactively, we will be able to create opportunities for meaningful cooperation across party lines.

Examples of Successful Cross-Party Collaboration

When cross-party dialogues and collaboration is achieved, it has had wide-ranging positive impacts. For example, in 1997, political leaders from Northern Ireland and South Africa engaged in exchanges facilitated by an organization, showcasing the potential for peer-to-peer learning to bridge deep political divisions.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ongoing ethnic tensions fostered fragmented government systems, cross-party collaboration between elected representatives at municipal, entity and state levels has allowed them them to reach across party lines and advance initiatives to combat corruption, improve political party law, strengthen tax provision and promote public-private partnerships.[12]

Similarly, in Ukraine and the Democratic Republic of Congo, cross-party engagement initiatives, such as the Jean Monnet Dialogues, have focused on issues like opposition rights, electoral reforms and gender quotas and successfully pushed these cross-party initiatives into national parliaments.[13] In Ukraine, the Dialogues were first held in 2016 but, owing to the success of the format, have been repeated over half a dozen times which only serves to demonstrate their effectiveness.

Despite challenging political environments, these efforts have contributed to fostering dialogue and collaboration across party lines. For instance, amid Yemen's civil war, women and youth party activists are working collaboratively across party lines to address community issues such as electricity outages and shortage of domestic gas with support from external organizations. These examples demonstrate the effectiveness of various approaches in promoting cross-party dialogue and collaboration, even in complex and diverse contexts.

🏆 Factors for Success:

- **Trust and rapport between party leaders and party members.** A personal relationship built through previous cooperation helps success.

- **Willingness to compromise.** Parties have to be flexible in their demands and willing to make concessions.

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[12] Strengthening Democracy Through Inter-Party Collaboration in Bosnia and Herzegovina | National Democratic Institute
[13] Ukraine: Consensus-Building Efforts Lay Groundwork for Cross-Party Reform | National Democratic Institute

- **Factual consensus on key issues.** Agreement on objective realities and data makes collaboration easier.

- **Incremental achievable goals**. Small wins through collaboration build momentum support for future collaboration.

- **Supportive public opinion.** Successful collaboration requires public support, not just elites. Positive reaction ensures collaboration gets publicity and provides incentives to continue.

- **Transparency.** Open negotiations (among party members) build trust and accountability for collaboration. Sometimes it is necessary to keep negotiations behind closed doors from the public.

- **Joint ownership of outcomes.** Sharing credit through bipartisan legislation sustains collaborative relationships.

- **Monitoring and evaluation.** Learning what drives success to scale up and replicate effective models for future collaboration.

⚠️ Factors for Failure:

- **Lack of trust** between parties/leaders due to past antagonism.

- **Short-term partisan incentives** that punish compromise.

- **Rigid ideological divides** with little room for consensus.

- **Weak support from partisan grassroots** who prefer obstruction.

- **Leadership changes** that sideline cooperative politicians.

- **Polarized political environment** with extreme rhetoric.

- **Polarized media environment** that criticizes bipartisanship.

- **Lobbying pressure** from ideological groups against collaboration.

- **Spoiler campaigns** that undermine collaborative initiatives.

- **Domestic political crises** that exacerbate partisan tensions.

- **Weak institutions and norms** that do not support power-sharing.

Dialogue: Foundational for Cross-party Collaboration

In the complex landscape of polarized societies, fostering collaboration and understanding between different parties is essential for meaningful democratic progress. Working together amidst deep-seated divisions requires a strategic approach that acknowledges the diversity of perspectives and values within a shared community. Identifying shared values, goals and concerns can serve as a starting point for dialogue that will lead to collaboration. Emphasizing humanity, transparency and accountability becomes instrumental in bridging differences and fostering a sense of unity among diverse groups. By working together and embracing the complexities of diverse perspectives, parties can contribute to a more democratic and inclusive society.

Dialogue is a key principle to cross-party collaboration, even more so in polarized societies, as dialogue allows for political parties to overcome barriers and create solutions for their communities. Political party dialogue bridges gaps and supports cross-party collaboration by building consensus, cooperation and trust among the party members.

Dialogue creates space to address political tensions in an inclusive and safe setting. Without dialogue, political parties would not be able to initiate collaborative efforts to work towards a unified purpose and align with the collective interests of all parties involved. By clearly defining shared objectives and outlining common goals, dialogue fosters a sense of purpose and minimizes potential conflicts within the coalition in the future. Open dialogue initiatives aimed at facilitating conversations and reducing personal biases are essential to strengthening cross-party dialogue and collaboration amongst political parties in polarized contexts.

While dialogue is important, it is not always easy. To ensure the dialogue space remains safe political parties should follow established common rules of engagement. It is imperative to ensure that all parties involved have an equal voice in establishing the ground rules. This often requires larger parties to be gracious and respectful in discussions, treating everyone as equals even if they hold more power. Some ways to encourage dialogue is through third-party involvement, attending non-contentious events together and emphasizing evidence-based discussions for positive impact.

Try to go beyond merely understanding and mitigating prejudice and instead work on establishing trust-based connections as the foundation for meaningful collaboration. Alliances should bridge personal differences and contribute to transforming broader social frameworks and political incentives. Emphasizing shared goals and common aspirations can help create a unified vision that transcends partisan lines. In essence, the success of cross-party collaboration in polarized societies hinges on the transition from dialogue and

empathy-building to actual cooperation. This transition holds the potential to drive positive change by challenging and reshaping the systemic factors contributing to polarization, paving the way for a more inclusive and collaborative society.

Tips for Dialogue:

- Adhere to **established rules** for engagement

- Use a **facilitator** (a third party facilitator when possible)

- Focus on **evidence-based** discussions

- Know your party's **redlines**

- Work through **misperceptions** due to information manipulation

- Build **trust** among members

- Start dialogue as soon as possible to mitigate any potential **unnecessary tensions** between parties

- Know your party's **values and unique selling proposition** before working together

When should cross-party dialogue begin?

Consultations with key political party leaders are suggested prior to hosting cross-party dialogues. While it is important to have members at different levels of the party participate in cross-party collaboration, having the support and buy-in from party leadership is essential for longevity and success.

The timing to begin cross-party collaboration will vary based on the country and political context, but it is important to emphasize that cross-party dialogue can happen before or after elections and informally or formally. Considerations should be made around elections, for example, as it can be more challenging to get party members into a room when they are actively campaigning. Even in more polarized societies, parties can come together over capacity building, or other non-policy-making or non-decision-making meetings to begin the process of dialogue.

Cross-party collaboration and dialogue is a process that ebbs and flows and it is important for parties to adapt engagement depending on the context in their country. It remains crucial to remember that dialogue and collaboration can look differently throughout the experience. At times it will be easier and more productive to have informal conversations, while other times formal discussions will be more appropriate. At times parties may choose to sit out, while others partake, but the option to participate should always remain an option.

Prior to cross-party collaboration and dialogue

Before parties engage in dialogue and collaboration, a useful exercise for parties is to reflect on their mission, vision, voter base, and unique selling point. Having clarity before entering into discussions allows parties to have a deeper understanding of their goals and desired outcomes from cross-party collaboration that will be sustainable. In addition, conducting a SWOT analysis of their own party will help them to identify why it is important to participate in cross-party collaboration, what they can bring to the table in cross-party collaboration, where they may want to look for support, and anticipate and mitigate any concerns they may have.

Consider the following questions in a **SWOT Analysis**:

Strengths

- What are the practical benefits to cross-party cooperation?

- What can it achieve for voters, the public and for your party?

- What advantages are at your disposal?

- What areas has your party excelled at?

Weaknesses

- What are the internal party challenges?

- What weaknesses exist technically, politically or organizationally?

- What do people see as your weaknesses?

- What loses you support?

- What are your short term and long-term fears?

Opportunities

- What events are coming in the future that you could use to meet an objective?

- What trends in society have you identified that cross-party work can help with?

- How are things changing?

Threats

- What are your opponents doing?

- What events are coming that will impact your party negatively?

- What trends in society might make your job more difficult?

Entry points for discussion

Identifying entry points for discussion allows parties to find common ground and unite around topics they can mutually agree on. This is a vital component to lasting cross-party engagement and collaboration. By identifying key entry points of discussion, parties can identify easier topics to begin dialogue and topics in which parties are willing to compromise on solutions. Entry points allow parties to come together in a lower stress environment and build relationships and trust in order to address more challenging issues further into the process.

When parties are looking to find entry points, it may be useful to list policy issues that they would like to address or problems in their communities they would like to solve and rank them on topics they feel they can collaborate on, which can help identify key issues. In addition, when considering entry points for discussions parties should consider the following to help identify the topics:

- What political processes or events are taking place or planned in the next 3, 6, 9, 12 months (e.g. national or local elections, regulatory reforms, development planning)?

- What issues are dominating the political agenda and to what extent do these provide opportunities for engaging parties in policy development?

- What types of resistance might reforms face and from whom within different parties and among stakeholders?

- Which organizations or groups of people have a specific set of issues they have been working on? Or is there a well-defined constituency (e.g. women, youth, specific community)?

- What issues do citizens care most about (e.g. public health, water and sanitation, education)?

- Consider the extent to which parties have:
    - Functioning, active branches and wings;
    - An active and documented membership;
    - Large regional representation; and
    - Formal and informal relationships with think tanks, civil society and other groups who could assist with policy development.

- What opportunities exist to mainstream inclusiveness throughout the program approach?

- What topics are less or more resource intensive?

- What types of incremental changes are realistic given the operating context and resources in the short- and medium-term?

Tips for Program Planning:

For NDI staff seeking to support cross-party collaboration, it can be useful to create a survey to send to political parties that are interested in collaboration or host consultations, using the concepts above to guide the survey. In addition, staff should attempt to create a robust list of issues in the country that political parties are interested in and have parties rank them in importance, but also in order of what they believe are easier topics for them to discuss versus not. The staff should then analyze the information and create a short list of areas in which discussions can begin. This could be more local level issues (i.e. sanitation in region x) or can be issues where parties have similar stances, but different approaches to applying solutions. While it is great to find areas where common solutions can be found immediately, it is more important to identify entry points where discussion can begin, even if solutions are not agreed upon.

This can also be done in an exercise with participants in the same room. For that, participants should sit with their parties and create a list of topics and issues they feel they can discuss with other parties. The facilitator can then take the responses, either anonymously or in a discussion and draft a list for the entire group. For topics or issues that come up more than once will signal areas of entry points for dialogue.

Use of a facilitator

To support cross-party dialogue in a polarized environment, political parties may find it useful to identify a facilitator to help encourage and moderate dialogue. The facilitator can be someone selected from within the cohort of political parties, a small group representing each political party or a third-party individual. Often, it is useful to have a third-party, non-partisan facilitator to guide dialogue if the group is financially able to procure one. A facilitator should be responsible for convening and managing the dialogue without influencing discussion topics. The facilitator(s) should remain neutral to the process of establishing guidelines for dialogue, and if elected, to leading or mediating the dialogues.

Third party facilitator

A third-party facilitator can help overcome barriers between polarized parties. If the cohort elects to identify a third-party facilitator, the majority of the group should accept the decision to ensure that everyone is comfortable and remains part of the dialogue.

Within the party facilitator(s)

While an individual can be selected to facilitate the dialogue, it is recommended for the parties to select a representative from each party to establish a facilitator group. If the cohort opts for a small group to lead the dialogues, the group can decide to jointly lead each session or alternate sessions among the facilitator group.

Once the facilitator(s) is selected, they will guide the cohort in dialogue by gathering input from parties and leading conversations based on agreed upon guiding principles. If the facilitators are selected from within parties it is imperative that they remain neutral during dialogues. Their role is of a facilitator, not a party member in this case.

Tips for Program Planning:

It is possible that NDI staff could be seen as a neutral moderator for these discussions. NDI may also take the opportunity to suggest facilitators or assist in identifying suitable neutral facilitators.

Recommendations for facilitators:

1. Build trust between party members in cohort
2. Create a positive and safe environment
3. Understand redlines
4. Allow room for debate, but maintain focus on the given topic of discussion
5. Ensure consensus when decisions are needed

Cross-party dialogue and collaboration is vital to sustaining democracy and finding solutions to challenges in society. Listed below are some key elements to remember as political parties invest in cross-party dialogue and collaboration:

- Preparatory work is crucial in establishing an agenda, building goodwill, and seriously deliberating about proposals. Additionally, laying the groundwork of establishing shared principles is key.

- Keep dialogues small to allow for more fluid and effective discussions.

- Use credible facilitators (either external or internal).

- Invest in cross-party collaboration over the medium to long term. Changing the culture of dialogue and debate takes considerable amounts of time and effort, and is likely to require more than one intensive meeting.

- Remember that dialogue is cyclical and not singular for it to be successful.

- Given that negotiation can be done at all levels in the party, parties should support building the capacities of staff and actively involved members to engage in constructive dialogue.

Case Study on Cross-Party Dialogue:
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Political competition in Bosnia and Herzegovina largely aligns with ethnic identity, and public discourse often focuses on the division of power among the country's three largest ethnic groups. The competing interests of these groups, and deep-seated mistrust between them, have contributed to long-standing political conflicts at all levels of government, creating frustration among citizens and hindering reform efforts necessary to advance the country's democratic transition and achieve benchmarks for European Union (EU) candidacy status.

To promote issue-based dialogue between political parties, youth representatives from eight of the major political parties established a working group to draft policy proposals reflective of youth interests ahead of the 2018 general election. With NDI's technical expertise, the working group designed an outreach plan that included traveling to municipalities across the country to gather feedback from fellow youth and civil society organizations on their policy proposals.

The working group utilized information from these consultations to develop a joint declaration on youth priorities, which they presented to members of parliament representing each of the eight political parties. This initiative provided a model for continued collaboration among youth in political parties across ethnic and entity divides, as well as among youth and senior party leadership.
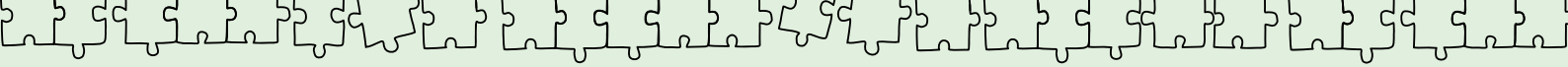
Determining Guidelines for Working Together

One crucial aspect for working together is to establish common rules for engagement among parties aiming to collaborate. This section focuses on considerations to establish common rules for continued cross-party collaboration. As parties begin to engage in collaborative efforts, it is crucial to establish a strong foundation for a working relationship. To do so, parties should define standards and guidelines that resonate with the values of individuals and their respective parties. **This process should involve equal participation, embracing diversity and differences, fostering mutual respect, promoting trust-building and clarifying roles and responsibilities.** Common rules for engagement are meant to be adaptable, so as parties continue working together they may wish to revisit and update their guiding principles as they develop stronger relationships.

Establishing common rules for engagement minimizes the opportunity for disagreements to derail cross-party dialogue and collaboration and holds the political parties accountable to collaboration. In polarized societies, common rules for engagement **can allow parties to set boundaries on topics that should not be discussed; allow for respect among each other; gain understanding that while processes may be different, long-term goals are similar; and, determine practices to ensure a safe, inclusive and productive environment.**

Tips for Program Planning:

To establish common rules to engagement, parties should randomly divide into small groups (approximately 5-10 individuals) and create their list of guiding principles before joining back together in the larger group to formalize their rules. NDI staff should supplement or encourage parties to think further using previous examples once the list has been created and agreed upon if there seems to be some areas in which the common rules for engagement are not addressed. Always remind parties that it is acceptable to disagree, but zero is not an option.

It is important to keep in mind the following when developing common rules for engagement:

- Focus on inclusion and breaking points where the group should take a pause and come back together.

- Rely on facts and not misconstrued perceptions when debating topics where ideas differ.

- Attacking individuals is not constructive to cross-party dialogue.

- Competition of ideas is necessary for democracies to survive.

- Difference in ideas does not necessarily mean democratic values differ across the political parties, and parties can learn from different approaches or ideas to strengthen their work for their communities.

- Consistency is key. Routine meetings or gatherings and consistent communication among the parties will be crucial to success.

Things to consider when discussing common rules of engagement:
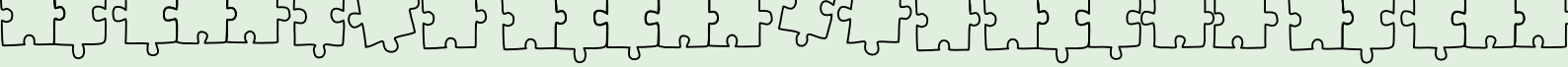
- How to determine collaborative topics.

- Locations where parties will meet.

- Communication processes – identifying the channels to communicate and the process of external outreach.

- Determine roles and responsibilities.

- Ethical considerations.

Meeting locations and times

One step is figuring out how to get together. Where and what time the parties choose to meet matters for fostering a collaborative and neutral atmosphere. Consider the following:

- Are there existing locations, such as offices, suitable for meetings?

- Are neutral spots without ties to any specific political party preferred?

- Should there be a rotating meeting schedule with different locations, or is a single location more beneficial?

- What are the preferences regarding online meetings?

- Can accessibility be ensured for all participants?

- What time of day is suitable for all participants?

Introducing host-variety with a rotating schedule could be beneficial. Meetings could occur at each party's offices in turns, promoting fairness and providing each party with the opportunity to host discussions in their own space.

In the absence of party offices, exploring third-party venues like conference centers or community spaces could maintain a neutral meeting ground, for example community centers or libraries. If opting for third-party venues, it is important to establish parameters for expenses to ensure equal contributions, a practice that can align with the rotating meeting schedule. Additionally, incorporating informal settings, such as grabbing a meal or coffee together, especially for less sensitive issues, could contribute to a more laid-back and open atmosphere for discussions.

Remember to consider virtual meetings, particularly when in-person gatherings are difficult. This ensures the participation of everyone from different locations. Virtual meetings are beneficial when party members do not all reside in the same city or community. If applicable, host hybrid meetings where participants can join both virtually and physically. Regardless of the chosen approach, keep accessibility in mind. Ensure that the selected locations are easily accessible and available for everyone involved.

Women are often the caretakers at home, and thus certain times are not suitable for meetings. Consider having a rotating schedule where the meetings differ for the hour being held or consider times that are suitable for caretakers to attend. Collaborating on the decision-making process for meeting spots and times and seeking input and preferences from all parties can contribute to creating a fair, open and collaborative environment in their collective efforts.
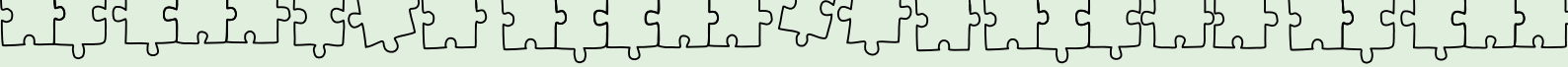
Communication Channels

Effective communication is the key for success in establishing and maintaining cross-party collaboration, especially in the complex dynamics of a polarized society. Once the collaboration is established, prioritize ongoing and consistent communication. Open communication plays a pivotal role in breaking down barriers and creates an environment that encourages open and honest dialogue.

Prioritize the setup of communication channels before concluding collaborative sessions. Including this in the common rules for engagement sets the expectations and helps keep the group accountable to continued engagement:

- Establishing a communication channel allows all participants involved to have a system to share resources, schedule meetings and collaborate on necessary issues.

- Having one or two set methods for communications, all parties can be involved, and communication will be streamlined, limiting the ability for exclusion or poor communication negatively affecting the groups goals of cross-party collaboration.

Once appropriate communication tools are established, a brief communication plan for consistent messaging should be developed. Choose from platforms that are commonly used among the participants. These may include Signal, Viber, WhatsApp groups, Discord, email groups, etc.

It may be worth addressing potential security concerns, especially regarding classified information, to maintain the confidentiality of sensitive data and establish norms for sharing sensitive information if required.

Formal versus informal communication

While formal communication channels are essential for the work-flow and shared decision-making and information, informal set ups could offer advantages. Regular informal gatherings provide a platform for addressing new issues, enriching ongoing debates and resolving potential disputes before personal or party prestige becomes overly involved. Informal communication is equally important, providing additional opportunities to build relationships, foster trust and gain deeper insights into partners' perspectives. This dual approach to formal and informal communication creates a robust foundation for collaboration in navigating the challenges in a polarized society.

Roles and responsibilities

The clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, spanning tasks from scheduling meetings to note taking and reporting, mitigates confusion and fosters a culture of accountability:

- Participants should work to align individual competencies and different party strengths with assigned roles to ensure a success and continued collaboration, i.e. if a party has a strong social media presence those individuals may be better suited to focus on the joint social media campaigns than the meeting scheduling.

Conflict mitigation

It is important to define protocols to address disagreements respectfully and avoid public disputes. Parties and participants bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives, understandings and proposed solutions to stated problems. While working together may pose challenges, recognize that disagreements, when managed effectively, can lead to better results than avoiding them altogether. Disagreements have the potential to stimulate better ideas, foster creativity and drive innovation:

- One common barrier that hardens collaboration is the assumption that opposing views are closed-minded. This misconception often arises from relying on stereotypes which may oversimplify the perspectives of those with differing views. By acknowledging that disagreements are opportunities for growth rather than imminent conflicts, parties can unlock the benefits of engaging with diverse viewpoints.
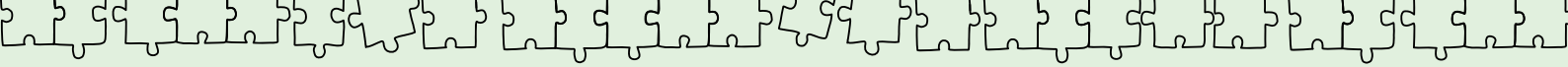
In fostering open and positive conversations, the choice of words becomes very important:

- Utilizing positive language establishes a constructive tone, which helps set the stage for reciprocal positive engagement.

- Acknowledging others' perspectives is crucial; phrases such as ''I understand that you believe…'' and ''You told me that…'' shows active listening which opens avenues for constructive dialogue.

- Emphasizing shared objectives, even during moments of disagreement, steers conversations toward constructive outcomes and maintains a collaborative spirit.

Building Trust

Building trust is necessary in cross-party collaboration. Trust is essential to overcoming partisan divisions and enabling collaboration and dialogue. Without trust, respect for the process of cross-party collaboration and dialogue can be diminished. Being transparent and inclusive supports building trust among parties. It promotes buy-in and reduces the perception of dominance. A balance between informal and formal interactions can help build familiarity and trust. As trust is developed, it allows for harder conversations to take place among parties. While trust can take time, regular engagement between parties and respecting guiding principles, trust can be built in order to sustain dialogue and collaboration. It allows for party members to remember that everyone is a human being and makes it harder to personally attack individuals.

Tips for Program Planning:

NDI staff can support trust building directly or indirectly. For example, groups can choose to engage in exercises that focus solely on trust building.

Another way to build trust is by assigning tables to participants, ensuring that tables are intermixed with party members for discussions and meetings. Another way to support trust building is during exercises regularly swapping groups or partners so as all participants have the opportunity to engage with one another.

Coalition Building

Coalitions are a common and often necessary feature of vibrant democracies, enabling the development of trust, dialogue and collaboration between political parties to reach consensus on: **fundamental rules and structures regulating political competition and governance; arrangements for peace and security; and policies where a high degree of stability is desirable.** Coalition building is therefore an important strategy for depolarization and allowing political parties to collaborate with each other in order to advance policy goals.

Political parties are often incentivized to form coalitions when they face shared external challenges. In countries characterized by extreme polarization or conflict, party supporters may view cross-party collaboration as a sign of weakness or a betrayal of party values. In those countries, the failure to establish successful coalitions has often weakened democratic reform efforts and exacerbated polarization. Despite the challenges, countries where political parties build bridges and collaborate have greater success at policy reform and remaining accountable.

Political parties must undertake a strategic approach to maximize the potential benefits and mitigate the risks involved in coalition building in order to enhance their policy outcomes and counter polarization. Below are five steps to support coalition building in cross-party dialogue.

- **Step 1: Developing a Party Agenda**

  The first step before entering coalition building should be the development of a party-specific agenda where parties come together to identify what possibilities a collaboration could bring in terms of different policy developments, learning outcomes, etc. Parties that conduct detailed analyses and develop a good agenda 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. Parties should also understand their mission, voter base, and red lines before entering into coalitions.

- **Step 2: Negotiating a Coalition**

  Based on the agenda that each party has prepared, parties should come together to negotiate and hopefully reach agreement on the terms for the coalition and the drafting of an agreement on the guidelines for working together. Negotiate easy items first: this will help build trust and create a positive environment. It is important to remember that zero is not an option. Even so, saying no or agreeing to disagree is acceptable, but how it is said can affect negotiations.

- **Step 3: Getting started**

  As negotiation begins to wrap-up, the drafted 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 drafted agreement in a written document that is detailed enough to guide the day-to-day performance of the coalition.

- **Step 4: Working in a Coalition**

  As the 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. It is important to develop clear lines of communication and continuously monitor the impact of the coalition on your party and take remedial actions if needed.

- **Step 5: Accountability and 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.

If parties follow each of these steps, which are detailed further in NDI's checklist, then they will be more prepared to engage in coalition building—even in polarized contexts.

For more information on coalition building see, Coalitions: A Guide for Political Parties, developed by NDI and the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights. The publication includes practical tips and advice from political leaders around the world and worksheets for each step of the process.

Sometimes, collaboration through formal coalitions is untenable due to pernicious polarization widening the political distance between prospective partners. One way parties can navigate these situations to achieve a shared goal is through collaboration outside of formal coalitions. In the context of government formation, the five steps to coalition building can be applied to negotiate a confidence and supply agreement in which parties agree to conditions which enable one party to secure the conditional support of the other in its governing mandate.

Inclusion is a key principle that can help facilitate strategic coalition building amid polarization.
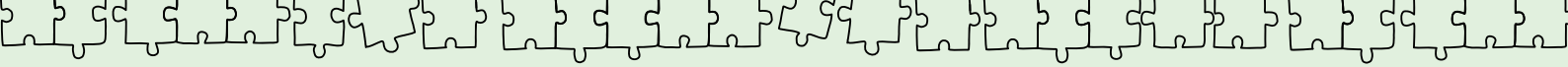
Inclusion

The degree to which party members are included in decision making processes can impact the democratic legitimacy of cross-party collaboration. When diverse groups of party members are not consulted in the planning and implementation of cross-party dialogue, they will be less likely to support those initiatives. Conversely, organized affinity groups within political parties — particularly those representing traditionally excluded communities — can be instrumental in fostering cross-party dialogue through issue-based collaboration with their peers across political party lines.

🌍 Case Study on Dialogue and Inclusion in Coalition Building: Zambia

Women in Zambia face structural barriers to engaging in political processes, impacted by socioeconomic factors including financial barriers to running for office as well as threats of electoral violence. Between 2013 and 2021, the Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL) and Political Parties of Finland for Democracy (Demo Finland) collaborated to promote the inclusion of women in political processes, supporting women's wings of nine political parties to establish dialogue platforms on the local and national level. These platforms fostered an environment that enabled women from different political parties to freely discuss their ideas and experiences in promoting political gender equality as well as cooperate on advocacy initiatives designed to address those issues. For example, members from different parties embarked in joint campaign activities during the 2021 local elections, illustrating cross-party solidarity and coalition building. Women's wings from different political parties also issued joint statements to the media through these platforms to raise awareness of issues such as gender-based violence in the electoral process.

In focusing on women's political participation, an issue that affects members of all political parties, the dialogue platforms succeeded in laying the foundations of political coalition building through establishing cooperation between members of different — and often disparate — political parties.

This collaboration among women party members led to progress on gender equality across each of the nine political parties, who drafted gender equality plans that addressed candidate selection and electoral program development practices, which can help improve the representation of women in politics.

The ZNWL was a key factor in the success of these initiatives as a trusted third-party actor able to facilitate and mediate dialogue from a neutral perspective.

The benefits of including diverse cross-sections of party membership in cross-party collaboration and dialogue processes include:

- Better informed negotiation approaches;

- Fairer policy proposals;

- Broader consent for negotiation approaches; and,

- Greater organizational capacity for policy advocacy.

Strategies for ensuring the inclusion of diverse groups include:

- Engaging party leadership on inclusion;

- Organize meetings to accommodate for diverse schedules, i.e. childcare;

- Direct engagement of citizens from traditionally-excluded communities;

- Offering autonomous roles in initiatives;

- Having an open agenda;

- Adapt timelines to ensure greater legislation; and,

- Considering the linguistic needs of those groups.

In addition to engaging a diverse cross-section of their members, parties can also develop coalitions around a particular issue area that include external partners. Civil society organizations (CSOs), members of academia and citizens can help provide additional expertise and represent a more diverse range of perspectives in the cross-party collaboration and negotiation process. One example is citizens and CSOs can work with members of the Scottish Parliament to organize cross-party groups to collaborate with external stakeholders in developing legislative solutions to policy priorities. These groups are not publicly funded or integrated into parliamentary structures, but they are obliged to adhere to the Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament, ensuring an additional degree of accountability and safeguarding in the dialogue process.

💡 Tips for Program Planning:

NDI staff should encourage parties to reflect and identify women, youth, persons with disabilities (PwDs), and other marginalized individuals or groups that should be included in the cross-party collaboration process. For those who have women's, youth, or PwDs wings in their parties, this can be a great start to inclusion.

Parties should take the time to map out who in their party is missing from the dialogue and how parties can engage with these groups in a thoughtful and meaningful way. Upon mapping out those who should be included, the parties can engage with the individuals or groups to support stronger cross-party collaboration.

Policy Development

Policy development stands as a cornerstone of effective governance, playing a pivotal role in shaping the direction and priorities of a society through citizen-centric decision-making. It serves as a mechanism through which political parties can collectively address pressing issues, design solutions and guide the trajectory of a nation. Collaborative policy development across party lines holds immense importance in this process. **When parties work together, pooling their insights and diverse expertise, they can:**
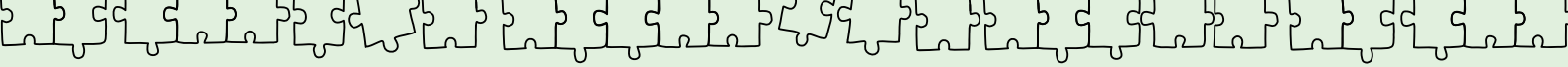
- Create more comprehensive and balanced policies that draw on a diverse range of perspectives;

- Navigate ideological differences and find common ground;

- Overcome potential biases;

- Promote a sense of shared responsibility in governance and hold parties accountable for their roles; and,

- Enhances the legitimacy and public acceptance of the resulting policies.

This collaborative approach ensures that policies are not shaped solely by the interests of one party but rather reflect the interests of the broader community. For instance, when addressing climate change, a cross-party collaborative approach ensures that policies are not only environmentally sound but also considerate of economic implications and social equity. Collaborative efforts in policy development also play a crucial role in the effective implementation of laws within the government and hold political parties responsible for the promises and initiatives outlined in their policies. In essence, policy development becomes a powerful tool for political parties to showcase their dedication to responsive governance and accountable decision-making.

🌍 Case study on Cross-Party Collaboration:
Jean Monnet Dialogues, Ukraine

Ever since the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine's political landscape has been marked by significant political polarization with a deeply divided parliament. To support cross-party dialogue efforts, the National Democratic Institute and the European Parliament sponsored the Jean Monnet Dialogues (JMD) in 2016. The JMD aimed to bring together political parties, build consensus and enhance parliamentary functioning. Prior to the JMD, bilateral meetings were conducted with parliamentary factions and the Speaker to identify key issues and establish ground rules for the dialogue, including mediation principles, equal engagement and media presence.

Before meetings, each faction prepared and submitted position papers on selected topics that were circulated to all other factions. Doing so encouraged the factions to have a well thought out position prior to the Dialogue and allowed them to familiarize themselves with the positions of other factions in order to identify potential areas of agreement.

The first JMD, held in France, featured closed-door meetings and structured dialogue with each faction represented by a leader, an MP and a senior staff member. Selected staff documented discussions and provided summary notes at the end of each session, highlighting areas of agreement and those requiring further discussion. A draft agreement, encompassing major consensus points, was reviewed and signed by all parties.

The JMD process led to the formation of the Parliamentary Working Group on Internal Reform of the Verkhovna Rada, overseeing the implementation of the political decisions agreed upon during the dialogues. Key outcomes also included 'white papers', standard ministry reports and proportional representation in parliamentary committees and delegations. The JMD model transformed the work philosophy in the Ukrainian Parliament, fostering a platform for continued cross-party dialogue and understanding.

Identifying Policies

Political parties usually have their own policy agendas as part of their platform. While each political party has their own policy priorities, collaborating on policy development benefits all citizens. Often in polarized societies it can appear impossible to collaborate cross-parties to create policies and pass them through legislative bodies. There will be policy topics that do not fit for cross-party collaboration, but there could also be many topics, or issues, that will benefit from the support of cross-party collaboration, different perspectives and broader support once it enters the legislative process.

To identify issues that can be addressed collaboratively, party members should consider both party priorities and citizen concerns. One challenge with selecting an issue (or issues) to address is that every issue feels important. Creating a consensus across political parties through dialogue is essential to balancing policy priorities. When drafting suggestions to discuss among the cross-party cohort, participants should consider that issues should be:

- **Widely felt** - the issue should be a priority for the majority of citizens and parties involved. It is possible that the issue will not be a priority for every party, but if participants prioritize inclusive and community focused issues, the hope is to have nearly all agree to the issue for policy design. It may be common for the policy to not be the top priority for any party, but still long-term priorities for parties.

- **Concrete** - the issue should be simple and easy to understand and clearly relates to people's lives, i.e. a policy that enhances the participation of traditionally excluded groups.

- **Realistic** - the issue should be something that can be brought to the legislative body for discussion, and ultimately approved by the legislative body and/or passed into law. Having issues come forth from multiple parties will help generate the discussion in legislative bodies, but the issue should also be something that can actually be discussed and achieved.

- **Positive** - the issue should be focused on providing a solution to a real problem that affects citizens.
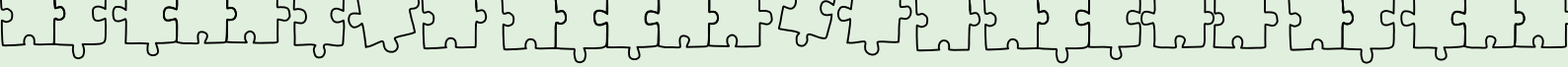
Case study on Cross-Party Collaboration: Multi-party Agreement on an Anti-Racism Protocol in Colombia

Colombia's decades-long conflict left profound divisions within society particularly impacting marginalized communities, especially Afro-Colombians. Despite strides toward peace, persistent issues like poverty, institutionalized racism and inadequate political representation continued to afflict these groups. Through the support of NDI, multiple political parties came together for discussions specifically focusing on anti-racism efforts targeting Afro-Colombians with the aim of creating a multi-partisan agreement on an anti-racism protocol. These discussions aimed to address racial discrimination within political spaces.

Once common interest to establish a multi-partisan protocol for enhancing the political participation of the Afro-Descendant population was identified, external facilitators were utilized for hosting discussions. Sessions were led by academic experts, focusing on developing a training plan with an ethnic education approach.

Through collaborative efforts and several rounds of roundtable discussions, eight political parties contributed to the development of an anti-racism protocol. This protocol equips parties with tools to combat internal racism and discrimination while promoting diversity and inclusivity. It represents a pioneering initiative in Colombia, demonstrating a collective commitment across party lines towards fostering greater inclusion and equity.

To support policy development political parties should know their first, second, and red lines for policies they wish to collaborate on.

See appendix A for an exercise on policy prioritization.

Policy coordination

Once a policy topic has been decided, the next step involves establishing and agreeing on a plan to coordinate the policy development process. Every participant or team member brings distinct experiences that the collective can use to formulate the most effective policy recommendation. Additionally, reaching out to external stakeholders beyond the parties may be necessary. By involving not only the political parties but also external stakeholders, the policy gains greater strength and broader support when presented for government review.

See appendix B for a stakeholder analysis exercise to support parties in identifying key persons or groups to assist in cross-party collaboration.

Negotiation

Negotiation is a crucial part to the entire process of policy development in a polarized context. Cross-party collaboration involves a range of perspectives and opinions. It may be of interest to the group to host a series of negotiations on the topics or the policy issue(s) in question. Structured negotiations will grant space for each party to present their position, but also create space to hear and consider other ideas.

Negotiations can be useful to support dialogue in polarized contexts as it can provide time for each party to speak, the opportunity for constructive conversation and ensures that the conversation will focus on the issue, not factors that risk deepening polarization such as religion, ethnicity, etc.

It is possible to say no, but how you say no matters. In negotiations, parties should be respectful of one another and recognize that differences of opinions and perspectives can strengthen their policy agenda. When in a negotiation, parties should use active listening skills and analytical skills to listen, analyze and then present their argument for their agenda. In doing so, parties have a higher chance to reach an agreement where all parties have wins, while also compromising. At times, there will be moments when negotiations need to pause for members to regroup their thoughts, but also if things escalate to cool down and begin again with clear minds. It is okay to agree to disagree at times, but in negotiations, parties should always compromise and find wins they can present to their party supporters.
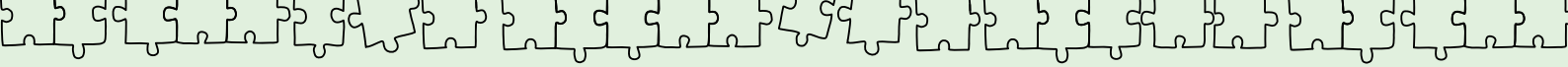
Guidinance for negotiations

- Have a neutral moderator.

- Determine a speaking order.

- Determine speaking time allotted and reaction/response time allotted for each participant (ex. 10 minutes for a party to present their perspective, 3 minutes for reaction responses from other parties, 5-7 minutes response from the party).

- Create and share ahead of time simple and concise questions. (ex. What is your party's position on the policy? What is the budget allocated and how are the funds found?).

- Focus on the issue and actionable items.

See appendix C for full exercise.

Compromise

It is crucial to recognize that compromise will be needed when negotiating and collaborating across parties. It is therefore important to consider red lines for compromising. When considering red lines, each party should remember that compromising priorities or actions does not necessarily mean they are compromising their values. It is okay to agree to disagree at times, and to say no, but doing nothing is never an option.

Messaging and Narrative-Building

Developing **messages** designed to convey a broader **narrative** is a crucial component of political party strategy, helping them build support among citizens for their policy positions as well as augment credibility in their capacities to legislate and govern. In the political realm, messaging can seem like a zero-sum game in which parties utilize messages to discredit their political opponents in pursuit of electoral gains. This perception often incentivizes party leaders, candidates, and members to utilize negative campaign tactics — criticizing or attacking an opponent — which can jeopardize collaboration opportunities and exacerbate polarization. However, effective political messaging and narrative building can emphasize a party's positive attributes that make it appealing to voters as well as create a foundation for coalition building in the post-election period.

Narrative-building and messaging are two distinct but interrelated aspects of a group's overall communications strategy that reinforce each other's effectiveness. The narrative — a larger story outlining an overall vision for society guided by core principles — serves as a foundation for the group's messaging. Messages help groups tell that narrative and explain their policy goals to voters in a coherent and digestible manner. A group's policy messages should outline what it wants to collectively achieve for society and how it wants to achieve it.

Policy communications should be anchored in a strategic approach, so groups can more easily — and responsibly — develop, disseminate and sustain effective messages to build support among voters for the party's overall narrative. Without those considerations, members can risk inconsistent messaging that obscures their narrative as well as exacerbate the polarization of the political landscape. This section will detail strategic approaches for parties to consider as they develop their political communications strategies.

When designing messages, groups must consider A) what is important to their target audience and B) where they get their information from. Generally, political candidates are low on voters' list of day-to-day priorities, and parties must compete for their limited time and attention.

To maximize resonance among voters, messages should be:

- **Targeted** - Developed to resonate with a specific audience.

- **Clear** - Easy to understand without the use of jargon and technical language.

- **Short** - Straightforward, and the main points should be easy to digest and repeat.

- **Consistent** - Aligning with the party's overall narrative, and should be repeated and reinforced by other messages within the party to increase the message's resonance among voters.

- **Truthful** - Realistic and believable positions and promises, backed by evidence of experience or knowledge in the issue area.

See appendix D for full exercise.

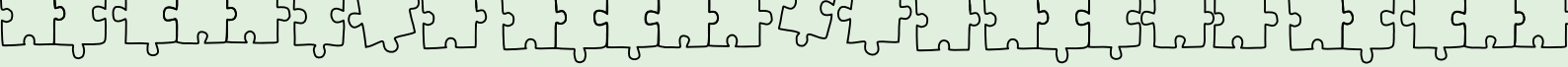## 💬 Cross-Party and Internal Communications

In *Political Party Dialogue: A Facilitator's Guide[14]*, International IDEA, NIMD, and The Oslo Center outline the following recommendations to help anticipate and counter the negative influence of polarization on cross-party communications:

- Identify any unproductive tensions and conflicts that might exist between political parties in advance.

- Consider different options for 'breaking the ice', including:

  - Meetings to get to know each other and improve personal relations;

  - Discussions between political parties and a third, non-party actor;

  - Exchanging views about the pros and cons of having an inter-party dialogue; or

  - Multiparty events and activities such as training, workshops, or study tours.

- See how focusing the dialogue on non-contentious subjects and using evidence-based information as input for discussions can have a positive effect.

To prepare for cross-party dialogue and negotiation, a party must consider its own internal communications to ensure that its members have adequate access to information in order to disseminate strategic messaging in dialogue and negotiations. To prepare for cross-party engagement, a party should undertake a consultative process to establish an internal preparedness strategy, outlining scenarios in policy dialogue to guide responses that adhere to the party's overall positions.

To begin planning an internal preparedness strategy, parties should establish their organizational **needs**, **interests**, and **positions** through inclusive party-wide consultations:

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[14] https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/political-party-dialogue-facilitators-guide

- **Need:** The party's priority concerning its viability (e.g. better electoral results)

- **Interest:** The party's policy objective (e.g. establishing a new legal framework for political parties allowing for a more level playing field).

- **Position:** The party's public stance (e.g. advocating for fairer political representation)

This framework will make it easier for parties to identify its policy priorities as well as any underlying issues impacting the party's political viability that need to be addressed. This internal communication exercise yields a qualitative basis from which to develop the party's messaging towards other political parties. Internal party preparedness practices and documents should be integrated into a party's communications strategy in order to solidify parties' narratives and consolidate their approach to messaging.

Experiences shared by the NIMD in Mozambique explore the utility of additional practices, such as a 'CC policy' in which every letter or email is copied to a party's Secretary General, President, and other thematic experts as relevant. An adapted version of this practice can help cross-party collaboration groups enforce transparency and open communication while ensuring information is shared across the organization.

Accountability

In collaborative politics, accountability is crucial as it is fostering trust, transparency and better outcomes for both the cohort and for citizens. Holding partners accountable and maintaining citizen-accountability are integral aspects of fostering successful collaboration. Make sure to set aside the time to articulate goals and desired outcomes collectively in order to provide a foundation for internal accountability. It is useful when setting internal accountability measures to build from the guidelines for working together and development implementation guidelines.

To effectively maintain cross-party collaboration, the foundation lies in agreed-upon terms that are clearly defined in written agreements. It is imperative to ensure that all partners share a comprehensive understanding of their roles, responsibilities and the expected outcomes. When assigning tasks to individuals, it is essential to establish clear deadlines. Deadlines provide a tangible timeframe for completion, ensuring responsibility is honored and progress stays on track. Make deadlines a part of goal-setting within the coalition to turn intentions into measurable achievements.

These agreed-upon terms should contain various aspects, ranging from anything from small steps in the collaborative journey to the specific responsibilities assigned to each participant and political party. Additionally, adherence to communication protocols, regular check-ins, data collection practices and decision-making processes should also be integral components outlined in these agreements. By establishing a robust framework, parties can navigate cross-party collaboration with clarity and cohesion.

In addition to the agreed-upon terms, make sure to implement regular check-in meetings. These meetings serve as opportunities to assess progress, discuss challenges and maintain open communication. Remember to define measurable performance metrics tied to the project's objectives, regularly evaluate and report on these metrics during the check-ins to track progress and identify areas that may need additional attention.

Inclusive decision-making is a cornerstone of transparency in cross-party collaboration. Regular updates play a vital role in keeping all members well-informed about collaborative initiatives. Whether through newsletters, reports or periodic town hall meetings, these updates contribute to a culture of transparency and accountability by sharing progress, acknowledging achievements, addressing challenges and outlining future plans.

💡 Tips for Program Planning:

Clearly communicate that accountability is not about blame but about ensuring commitments are met and shared goals are achieved. Emphasize that a culture of accountability encourages responsible behavior and prevents misunderstandings in order to create a community that views mistakes as opportunities for learning and improvement rather than as failures.

Celebrating successes, regardless of their scale, is a crucial element. Acknowledging achievements, no matter how small, contributes to a positive atmosphere and encourages sustained collaboration. Recognizing and valuing the contributions of each partner reinforces the collective effort and motivates ongoing commitment.

Next Steps

Cross-collaboration in polarized politics is vital for several reasons. It builds a positive brand and reputation by showcasing unity despite differences, resonating positively with citizens. This collaborative effort allows political parties to transparently display shared values and commitment to common goals, fostering trust in the political process. Cross-collaboration also strengthens support for laws and policies in government. Involving multiple parties ensures a broader range of perspectives, leading to increased buy-in and endorsement from diverse political actors. It also serves as a countermeasure against information manipulation, fostering a more informed electorate.

Additionally, cross-collaboration broadens the support base for political initiatives, representing a more significant portion of the political spectrum and gaining increased public support. Citizens gain confidence when witnessing collaborative policymaking, assuring them that policies result from thorough consideration and consensus building. These collaborative efforts not only address current challenges but also lay a foundation for tackling future issues together. By working across party lines, political entities build a framework for future cooperation and problem-solving. Engaging in cross-collaboration allows the utilization of diverse value adds and perspectives. Different parties bring unique insights, enriching the policymaking process and ensuring that policies are well-rounded and inclusive. In essence, cross-collaboration is important in navigating the complexities of polarized politics, contributing to effective governance and public trust.

Acknowledge that diversity and inclusion is foundational for effective and sustainable collaboration. It is therefore important to stay humble and embrace diversity of thought, background and experience that enriches the collaborative process. Navigating polarization requires a strategic and sustained approach, acknowledging that entrenched divisions demand thoughtful long-term commitment rather than immediate resolution. Long-term strategies emphasizing patient relationship building and iterative gains are crucial to mitigate the harmful effects of polarization. In seeking solutions, it is essential to explore cross-party learning opportunities as a means of fostering understanding and collaboration. These opportunities should be approached with a mindset focused on sustained efforts, avoiding quick-win activities that may not address the root causes of polarization. What are some opportunities that your party can bring to the table?

This exercise aims to facilitate proactive thinking and collaboration within individual parties, ensuring that everyone actively contributes to identifying cross-party learning opportunities. Sharing these suggestions collectively fosters an environment of openness and cooperation, laying the groundwork for enriched collaborative learning experiences.

Actors engaged in depolarizing roles, whether domestic civic groups or political opposition forces, must prioritize credibility on both sides of the divide. This requires persistence, skill and a commitment to higher principles.
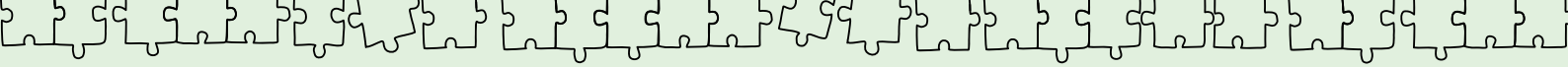
Building credibility involves neutral political engagement, outreach to diverse partners, transparency about objectives, and technical expertise. To guide these efforts effectively, it is crucial to evaluate the impact of cross-party learning programs. The cohort should regularly refer to their rules of engagement and determine an action plan to hold one another accountable and ensure cross-party dialogue and collaboration continue in the medium to long term.
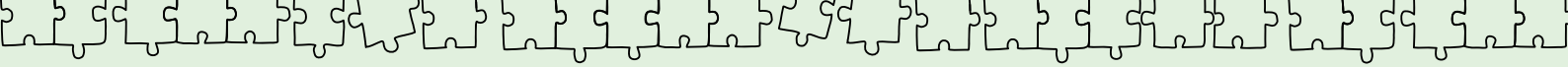
Conclusion

In increasingly polarized societies cross-party collaboration and dialogue are crucial for providing solutions to citizens and upholding democratic values. Parties should always prioritize cross-party collaboration, but it may be informal at times instead of formal and could be on one specific topic at times or many. The importance is always having the avenue to communicate and collaborate in order to counter authoritarian leaders and strengthen democracy in their countries. Cross-party collaboration is not just a one time event, it takes time to cultivate trust and repeated engagements are necessary to build strong collaboration among parties.

Below are reminders for cross-party collaboration:

- Amidst current political trends, there is always room to converse and collaborate among democratic political parties. It remains important to keep the process of dialogue going and communication lines open.

- Different perspectives can always find common ground on core democratic values.

- In any negotiations, the role of a mediator is critical to success.

- It is important to refrain from assumptions of other parties and instead discuss and negotiate with them to reach consensus on solutions to challenges in the country.

- To reach agreements all parties have to give a little, but also must walk away with wins to present to their party members.

- Learning from similar case studies around the world can be helpful to parties to learn from both successes and failures of cross-party collaboration.

- Entry points can look different. Sometimes it may be on a particular issue, whether at the local or national level. Other times it may be the use of different wings, such as women's wings, youth wings, or persons with disabilities wings. There may also be an opportunity for people in similar roles across the parties to begin collaboration, for example, Members of Parliament, secretary generals, lawyers, communication leaders, etc.

- While it is important to raise concerns of cross-party collaboration, it is even more important to find solutions or potential opportunities to assuage those concerns.

- Even though parties have red lines, parties can sometimes compromise where they can create policies to support their citizens, voters, and supporters.

- While parties believe they cannot reach an agreement, it is often the case that parties can reach compromises where all parties win.

- Trust and long-term commitment is important to maintain for the success of cross-party collaboration.

- When parties talk face to face they can really make change. They can talk through the differences they bring to the table.

- Listening to each other is really valuable, even if their ideas are incredibly different. If parties take time to listen and understand each other, they can really make a huge change.

- Respecting others creates an opportunity to listen to each other.

- In cross-party collaboration it should not be "I", it should be a "we" or "us".

- Common rules for engagement prepared in advance can facilitate a smooth collaboration process.

- Being realistic on the needs going into a discussion increases the opportunity to reach a consensus. Sometimes starting small is the best way to come together.

Exercise A: Policy Priority Identification

Purpose: To inform negotiation strategy, your key argument for any negotiation, engagement with other political parties, in order to have an issue based discussion and reach a joint policy agreement.

For Use By: Political party representatives in cross-party dialogue and collaboration.

How and When to Use:
Step 1 - Identifying policy priorities and red lines
Step 2 - Design your negotiation strategy

Tips

- Use your party documents, ideology or and party policy document
- Specific and address a real problem, felt by citizens, and the broader community
- It should differentiate you from other political parties
- Use objective facts, credible information
- Understand the other parties you will engage

Within each group, members will be provided with the issue. They will need to determine the first preferred policy, secondary position, compromise position, and red line position for the policy.

Use the table below to guide your prioritization exercise:

First preferred policy	Next best preferred policy	Compromise (fallback) policy	Red line position
1.			
2.			
3.			

Once each group has determined their preferred policy, next best preferred policy, compromise policy, and red line position they should craft their arguments for their policies, using the next best, compromise and red lines to help them in their negotiation efforts.

Exercise B: Stakeholder Mapping

Purpose: To identify potential allies, resource persons/organization and support needed at any given step in cross-party dialogue and collaboration.

For Use By: Political party representatives in cross-party dialogue and collaboration.

How and When to Use:
Step 1 - Identify issues
Step 2 - Identify potential internal and external stakeholders based on specific criteria
Step 3 - Identify where in the process stakeholders should be involved
Step 4 - Identify relevance, what level of engagement and how best to engage with stakeholder

Tips

Some questions to consider when conducting a stakeholder analysis:

1. Who does the problem directly impact?

2. Who does the problem indirectly impact?

3. What wings exist in the cross-party group or individuals parties that may be better suited to lead dialogue on the topic?

4. Who in the cross-party group is an expert on this issue (if any)?

5. What organizations represent those impacted?

6. Who is an expert on this issue (outside of the cross-party group)?

Participants should use the matrix below to identify potential stakeholders, where they should be involved and their relevance and level of engagement.

Stakeholder	Internal or external?	What stage should the group engage the stakeholder?	What level of engagement should be conducted with the stakeholder? (rank 1 to 5, 1 being lowest, 5 being highest)	Why is it important to engage with this stakeholder?	What is the capacity of the stakeholder?	How best to engage?
			Example			
Youth civil society organization	*External*	*Gathering input on policy priorities and messaging*	*5*	*Youth are the central focus point of the policy intended to support youth.*	*They are strong on social media and spreading messages, strong organizational capacity with long-term youth focused projects.*	*Solicit input on current issues youth are concerned about (we are bringing them to the table to discuss the issues and garner their support from the beginning). Solicit support in crafting and sharing messaging.*

Stakeholder	Internal or external?	What stage should the group engage the stakeholder?	What level of engagement should be conducted with the stakeholder? (rank 1 to 5, 1 being lowest, 5 being highest)	Why is it important to engage with this stakeholder?	What is the capacity of the stakeholder?	How best to engage?
Your Answers						

Exercise C: Negotiation

Purpose: To create policy arguments and negotiate policies using constructive feedback and dialogue.

For Use By: Political party representatives in cross-party dialogue and collaboration.

How and When to Use:
Step 1 - Craft argument
Step 2 - Present argument
Step 3 - Listen to feedback
Step 4 - Adapt / negotiate policy to reach consensus

Tips

General:

- Show empathy.
- Giving them all the information to make informed decisions will not undermine your position.
- Using dirty tricks to gain psychological advantages erodes trust. Be honest, concise, and truthful for your position asks and wants.
- Compromise and negotiation is everyone's gain.
- Sometimes agreeing to disagree is the best option.

When crafting an argument remember to use:

- Ethos: Focus on demonstrating trust, dependability, and preparation, appeal to the audience's standards of behavior or belief.
- Pathos: Use powerful stories to evoke emotions to create a desire to correct perceived wrongs.
- Logos: Use credibility by offering expertise, research, or data to support arguments.

When drafting an argument parties should:

- Clearly write the argument concisely;
- Share evidence to back their argument; and,
- Draw the connections through use of reasoning between the evidence and the statement.

When providing feedback:

- Address positives in the argument as well as concerns.
- If addressing concerns, provide suggestions for consideration.
- *Constructive feedback should offer specific, actionable recommendations for change and improvement. Good constructive feedback facilitates positive outcomes and creates positive dialogue.*

The group should select the policy they wish to debate (the policy was identified in the policy identification exercise). Once the policy is selected, the group should appoint a debate moderator and set aside time for the debate.

Step 1

Parties should prepare talking points to argue on behalf of your perspective of your preferred policy. This is where your party will advocate on behalf of your policy recommendation for the topic, which then will be constructively critiqued after. **The presentation of your position should state your argument in one sentence, provide evidence in simple and concise manners and present the reasoning by explaining the connection between the claim and data.**

Argument:

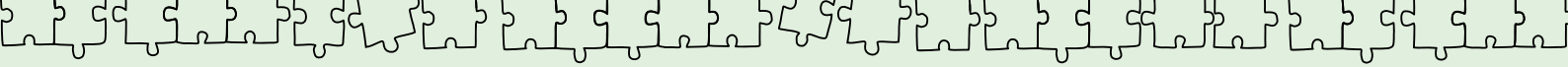_____

_____

Evidence (Facts):

_____

_____

Reasoning:

_____

_____

Parties should designate a <u>note taker</u> within their group. The note taker should write down the arguments from all parties and critiques for their own argument so the group can reflect later.

The moderator is responsible for keeping track of time, and ensuring the discussion remains respectful and on topic. The moderator should establish the schedule for the debate, who will speak first and for how long. The moderator can draw names out of a hat, or go alphabetically down the list of political

parties present, but the order should be as neutral as possible. After the order is selected, the group should sit with the parties around a table. The moderator will remind participants how much time they have to speak and for participants to be constructive in their comments and feedback.

Step 2

Each party will have a designated time to present their argument. The first party will be able to present their argument for the policy in their allotted time. The moderator should be timing to ensure all parties respect the time limits. All parties should present their arguments at this stage.

Step 3

Once the party has finished their argument, the moderator will provide time for comments from the other parties.
Note that this time for comments is to comment on the argument in question, not present their parties' arguments.

The process repeats itself until all parties have had a chance to present their argument.

Step 4

Once all parties have made their arguments and received constructive feedback, then the original party has an opportunity for a counter argument. The group should break out into their party groups to discuss before their counter argument. Repeat as needed to reach a consensus on the policy.
At the end of this, it is okay for the parties to agree to disagree.

At the end of the exercise parties should reflect in conversation what they have learned from listening to their counterparts and how they may incorporate feedback from the conversation to strengthen their arguments.

Exercise D: Messaging and Narrative Building

Purpose: To build a strong joint message and narrative for cross-party collaboration.

For Use By: Political party representatives in cross-party dialogue and collaboration.

How and When to Use:
Step 1-3 - Creating a message
Step 4 - Conducting a SWOT analysis on the message
Step 5 - Reviewing the checklist for good messaging

Step 1

**Answer these essential questions:**

- What problem have you solved?

- What is your solution?

- What makes your collaborative statement or choice better than a single party approach?

- Who is your intended audience?

Tips

A good message is:

- **Targeted** - Developed to resonate with a specific audience.

- **Clear** - Easy to understand without the use of jargon and technical language.

- **Short** - Straightforward, and the main points should be easy to digest and repeat.

- **Consistent** - Aligning with the group's overall narrative, and should be repeated and reinforced by other messages within the group to increase the message's resonance among citizens.

- **Truthful** - Realistic and believable positions and promises, backed by evidence of experience or knowledge in the issue area.

- **Repeatable**

The following exercise is developed to help the cross-party group design their messages and think through their communication strategies strategically. This requires the group to determine what they will be saying publicly about their work and how they will respond to criticisms (especially when people criticize working together).
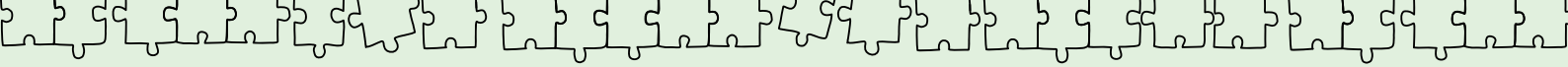
Step 2

With all of that in mind, what is your message?

Write your own message—a short, truthful statement that lays out your policy, opinion, purpose of your message. Consider the tips for a strong message and the questions you answered when crafting your message.
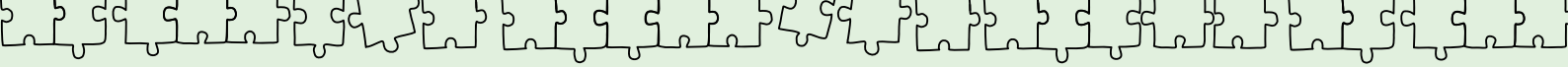
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Step 3

Ask for two volunteers – somebody who believes they have developed a strong message. Once you have selected two participants to volunteer, ask them to come up in front to present their messages. The other participants will conduct a SWOT analysis to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The group may also decide that certain parts from each message are stronger.

Step 4

Conduct a **SWOT Analysis**:

Strengths	Weakness (what elements could be strengthened)
Ex. The message is short and truthful.	Ex. There is too much technical language making it difficult for the intended audience to understand.

	Opportunities (that can strengthen the message)	Threats (where the holes are that could be questioned)
	Ex. The message can resonate with citizens across the political spectrum because it addresses a community wide issue.	Ex. Citizens see the message as over ambitious and doubt the cross-party cohort's ability to implement it.

Step 5

Facilitate the participants' feedback and write their comments in corresponding quadrants for about 12 minutes. At the end you can ask the volunteers what they would change in their messages. It may be useful to break into small groups to discuss the SWOT analysis and then come back together as a plenary group to discuss in greater detail. The group should reach a consensus on the message before leaving.

A **good message checklist**:

Targeted	Does your message address your intended audience?	✓
Clear	Is your message simple and use minimal or no jargon or technical language?	✓
Short	Is your message straightforward with the main points easy to digest and repeat?	✓
Consistent	Ils your message consistent with the group's decision/position?	✓

Truthful	Is your message realistic and believable, backed by evidence or knowledge?	✓
Repeated	Is the message easily repeatable? Is there a plan for repeating your message?	✓

For further consideration, participants may want to consider how they may need additional messages depending on whether the audience is internal or external:

- How would you message this internally, to get your party members on board with the joint message?

- How would you message this to other parties in order to get them on board with the message?

- How would you message this to the public?