

Parties in coalitions find themselves caught between the need to cooperate and differentiate

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The UK's first coalition government during peacetime since 1945 ended with the electoral decimation of the Liberal Democrats at the 2015 election, with the party seemingly punished for its inability to create a compelling justification for its 2010 voters to back them again in the post-Coalition UK political landscape. Here, **Inaki Sagarzazu** and **Heike Kluever** show that the dilemma for coalition partners is finding an appropriate balance between the incompatible needs to cooperate and differentiate.*



Coalition governments, while uncommon in the UK, are the norm in many countries in Europe and in many other democracies across the world. Where coalition politics prevail, political parties need to learn to navigate the turbulent waters that governing in coalitions entails. In the UK, for instance, the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems) had to learn this the hard way by [losing](#) a significant policy initiative –electoral reform – and a significant number of local councilors in the 2011 election and [49 MPs in the 2015 election](#).

One of the biggest problems the Lib Dems faced was that voters perceived them as being indistinguishable from the Conservatives. The Lib Dems found it extremely difficult to sufficiently differentiate themselves from their senior partners, and as such suffered a terrible blow in terms of the loss of their political support. However, if differentiating from your coalition partner(s) is the key to surviving a coalition government electorally, then how can you balance the electoral imperative with the imperative to effectively govern together with your coalition partner?

This question poses an interesting dilemma as coalition parties have to balance two contrasting forces. On the one hand they need to work together in order to effectively promote their common legislative agenda and maintain the stability of the Cabinet. Working together means that coalition parties need to reach policy compromises and also be able to communicate a joint view of where the country is headed. Simultaneously, coalition parties face electoral

pressures to differentiate from their partner in order to signal their own policy profile to voters. After all, if there is no difference between the parties in a coalition, what is the incentive for the voters who elected the junior partner to do so again? This electoral incentive runs counter to the governing incentive, as the latter calls for unity while the former calls for differentiation.

In a way, the good thing about coalitions is that usually –although not always- that the electoral calendar is known ahead of time. From the moment of the election, coalition parties have a good idea of when the next parliamentary election will be held. As such they can plan a communications and governing strategy that allows for balancing these two imperatives. [Research shows](#) that parties in coalition governments go through three periods in terms of their political communication strategy.

During the election parties ran carefully designed election campaigns where they selectively focused on policy issues on which they had an advantage to mobilize voters. At the beginning of the legislative term immediately following the election, coalition parties have to change from election mode to governing mode. At this stage, issue differentiation between coalition parties will continue for a while. This will be the case for three reasons;

- **First**, coalition parties cannot change their policy preferences immediately. Having campaigned for months on specific policy initiatives parties cannot simply abandon these as this would risk hurting their credibility and disappointing their voters. Second, coalition parties have an incentive to signal compliance with their commitments to voters by enacting their election promises right at the beginning of the term as media attention and public monitoring is still high at this stage. Third, political parties need time to get used to governing together with a partner. There is therefore a learning effect as coalition parties have to adapt to the new situation in which they have to coordinate their activities with at least one other party.
- **Second**, after the initial period of differentiation, coalition parties settle on a common issue agenda to effectively govern together and ensure the stability of the government. In this stage coalition parties avoid disagreement to strengthen and maintain the governing coalition and the offices they control. Coalition parties therefore prioritize policy issues with ample support in the coalition, avoiding those where they disagree with their partners. Because cooperation provides more benefits than costs, coalition parties focus on a common issue agenda. In consequence, partners talk about the same uncontroversial issues in the middle of the term as they enact their common legislative agenda.
- **Third**, and finally, as the legislative term is coming to an end, coalition parties look ahead. As their primary concern switches from governing to securing re-election, the imperative to demonstrate unity will be replaced by an imperative to differentiate. Given the difficulty of coalition parties in being perceived as different from their coalition partners, coalition parties thus adjust their issue priorities to make these differences clear. In consequence, rather than talking about the same unifying issues, they highlight their own policy profile by focusing on favorable policy issues that separate them from their coalition partners. In this stage, the costs of cooperation become larger than the benefits and differentiation ensues.

To reach these findings, our [study](#) looked at over 40,000 press releases published by parties in the German Bundestag from 2000 until 2010. While this study was limited to the German context, the experience of the Liberal Democrats in the UK points to a larger application of the findings. Parties in coalitions find themselves between the waters of cooperation and differentiation. The point of the electoral cycle is a key determinant into which strategy the parties will choose to follow.

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