

How to make a coalition work: rhetoric lessons from the 2010-15 government



How was it that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition lasted for a full five-year term? Although the formal and informal machinery of resolving disputes was important, rhetorical strategies also mattered, writes [Judi Atkins](#). She explains how by invoking values, goals, the 'national interest' and a common enemy, the Coalition not only endured but appealed to multiple audiences as well.

Following the shock result of the September 2017 German federal election, Angela Merkel's conservatives engaged in coalition talks first with the Free Democratic Party and the Greens, and then with the Social Democrats (SPD). The parties to these negotiations needed to be willing to compromise in order to form a government, but they also had to preserve their electoral viability. This tension is known as the 'unity-distinctiveness dilemma', and it is particularly acute for the junior coalition partner. Indeed, the SPD's initial reluctance to enter into a third grand coalition with the CDU/CSU [stemmed from the fear](#) that the larger party would once again take the credit for their ideas, and so cost them support. Unless these concerns are addressed, SPD members are likely to reject the deal and Germany would face a second election within months.

How, then, can (prospective) governing partners manage the competing dynamics of unity and distinctiveness that pervade coalition bargaining? My book [Conflict, Co-operation and the Rhetoric of Coalition Government](#) addresses this question using a modified version of Kenneth Burke's 'new rhetoric'. According to Burke, identification is achieved when a speaker persuades an audience that they share common interests, and this in turn promotes co-operation. From this starting point, I distinguish three forms of identification and division at work within coalition politics. They are: ideological, which is concerned with values; instrumental, which is founded on political expediency; and interpersonal, which centres on the relations between individuals or groups. The framework is applied across the life cycle of the 2010-15 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, and this analysis yields a number of lessons for other multi-party governments.

The formation of the Coalition was facilitated by the ideological overlaps between Conservative modernisers and the *Orange Book* Liberal Democrats. While this enabled them to co-operate effectively in areas such as higher education and foreign policy, the parties' ideological proximity made it difficult for the Liberal Democrats to preserve their distinctive identity. Differentiation is almost always a problem for the smaller party, but it is important for maintaining public trust. Consequently, the smaller party in a future coalition must be wary of sacrificing too many of its core values for the sake of government unity.

The attainment of ideological identification will be more difficult for some (potential) governing partners than others. Instrumental identification may prove invaluable here, as it affords an alternative means of finding common ground. For David Cameron and Nick Clegg, it enabled them to present the Coalition as the embodiment of a 'new politics' that placed the national interest before partisan concerns, and would give Britain the strong, stable government it needed. The case of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government also highlights the power of appeals to the 'national interest' in quelling dissent over matters such as the allocation of ministerial portfolios, as MPs risk appearing self-interested if they openly criticise the leadership at such an early stage.



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Alongside these strategies, senior Coalition figures employed identification through antithesis to unite their parties in opposition to Labour. This was the function of the deficit narrative, in which immediate reductions in public spending were portrayed as consistent not only with the Coalition's commitments to freedom and responsibility, but with the leadership's conception of the 'national interest'. Meanwhile, Britain's problems were blamed on the previous Labour government, whose allegedly reckless spending had destroyed the economy and necessitated the Coalition's austerity programme.

However, there was a danger that the Liberal Democrats' willingness to reproduce this narrative would come back to haunt them if the 2015 general election produced a hung parliament with Labour as the largest party. That Ed Miliband [reportedly ruled out](#) a deal with the Liberal Democrats if Clegg remained as leader suggests that sustained, aggressive attacks on the Opposition should be left mostly to the larger party, as the junior partner may later be confronted by the prospect of coalition talks with the former adversary.

The analysis also calls attention to the importance of interpersonal identification in coalition politics. Although Cameron and Clegg maintained a good working relationship on the whole, there were deep-seated tensions between the Prime Minister and sections of his parliamentary party. This was evident in relation to Europe, as some Conservative backbenchers were unable to forgive Cameron for breaking his promise to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty.

Cameron's difficulties were compounded by the suspicion among his MPs that the Party had compromised their principles and made too many concessions to the Liberal Democrats. While some doubts are inevitable, they can be mitigated if senior figures consult their parliamentary parties. Unlike the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats held several meetings and their MPs were able to read the text of the Interim Coalition Agreement. The benefits of this were clear, as it ['helped the Liberal Democrat leadership through all the tribulations of the Coalition that the party voted strongly to endorse it in the first place'](#). By giving their MPs a stake in a future partnership, party leaders can reduce internal tensions and so smooth the process of coalition governance.

Despite early predictions to the contrary, and conflicts over issues such as constitutional reform and Europe, the Coalition endured for a full five-year term. Although the establishment of formal and informal machinery for resolving disputes was undoubtedly important, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to suggest that rhetorical strategies also played a role in keeping the partnership together. By invoking values, goals, the 'national interest' and a common enemy, senior Coalition figures were able to invite identification on a variety of grounds, and so to appeal to multiple audiences.

Beyond the formation stage, this approach may have created the possibility of the basis of identification changing over time. So, an individual who initially identified with the Coalition's ideological commitments may later have come to identify primarily with its antipathy towards Labour. It is likely that the provision of several grounds for identification contributed to the longevity of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat partnership, and indeed that the use of similar rhetorical strategies would be similarly beneficial to the parties in future coalition governments.

Note: the above draws on the author's latest book, which is available [here](#).

About the Author



Judi Atkins is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the School of Humanities at Coventry University. She is the author of *Justifying New Labour Policy* (2011) and *Conflict, Co-operation and the Rhetoric of Coalition Government* (2018), as well as several articles on the relationship between ideas, language and policy in British politics.

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