Executive Summary

This report synthesizes insights from scholarly research on the factors that make coalitions effective. Our goal is to support organizations, foundations, and other entities seeking to build coalitions by identifying the conditions that create resilient, well-functioning collaborations across stakeholder groups. Although there is no formula for building an effective coalition, researchers from a wide range of academic fields, including political science, sociology, economics, business management, and community health argue that intangible resources like buy-in, commitment, trust, and agency are the building blocks of resilient coalitions. But these qualities do not emerge spontaneously. Rather, they result from coalition architecture that leaders and members collectively put into place. Coalition architecture is thus foundational to making coalitions work.

Across different types of coalitions, from political coalitions to business collaborations and public-private partnerships, the literature identifies a consistent set of features of good coalition architecture: democratic governance, robust learning loops, and clear roles and trusting relationships.

- **Democratic governance** refers to the structures, practices, and processes that distribute power within coalitions. Coalitions that effectively balance power tend to provide opportunities for all key stakeholders to have voice, establish clear and transparent mechanisms for decision-making, and have mechanisms for accountability.

- **Learning feedback loops** refer to the ability of a coalition to constantly learn, make meaning from change, and adapt. In practice, many coalitions that do this have a habit of collecting real-time data about the coalition's internal dynamics as well as the quickly changing external conditions in which it operates. After analyzing that data, they share it widely throughout the coalition, engage stakeholders to make meaning from it — and apply insights from it to the coalition's choices.

- **Clear roles and trusting relationships** refer to the need for clarity around the roles that people hold and how they relate to one another. This includes clarity around who is and is not part of the coalition and explicit, shared understandings of the roles and responsibilities of all individuals and organizations involved. Practices that facilitate trusting relationships include organically embedding the coalition in the community, creating opportunities for regular, meaningful interactions among coalition members, and engaging in smaller groups.

Ultimately, coalitions operate in uncertain political environments. There is no guarantee that they will be successful. But putting into place good coalition architecture that supports the development of trust, agency, buy-in, and commitment makes it more likely that a coalition will succeed and achieve its goals over time.

Developing the processes and practices that make up good coalition architecture is time consuming. But it is likely to pay dividends. Not only does it set up the current coalition for success, but it also leaves behind a footprint of processes, structures, practices, and relationships that persist long after the coalition disbands, creating the conditions for effective future collective action.¹

¹ Staggenborg and Lecomte 2009
Introduction

People and organizations often act together through multi-stakeholder formations to achieve a set of goals. A range of terms is used to describe these formations, including coalitions, partnerships, collaborations, alignments, tables, and so on. Throughout this report, we use the term coalition generically to refer to this broad array of multi-stakeholder arrangements. We know that coalition work can be hugely impactful for the individuals and organizations involved. Yet it is also complicated and challenging. What makes some coalitions more successful, sustainable, and generative than others?

Coalitions emerge in many areas of social and political life. They are ubiquitous because they are foundational to almost any effort to solve public problems. By definition, public problems are public precisely because they affect a broad group of people. Developing, implementing, and sustaining solutions to public problems thus necessitates buy-in, commitment, trust, and a sense of individual and collective agency.\(^2\) Put another way, solving public problems necessitates collective action across a range of stakeholders—especially to generate solutions that are resilient over time. Coalitions are the vehicles that structure these forms of collective action.

Building and sustaining effective coalitions is challenging for many reasons. First, coalitions often require shared action among diverse stakeholders with varied interests. People or organizations must partner with others who have distinct or even conflicting policy preferences, cultures, theories of change, and interests. Second, coalitions often have to navigate uneven power dynamics among the people and organizations involved. Explicit and implicit imbalances in political influence and decision-making power—patterns that are often historically entrenched—among people and organizations can easily cause friction. Third, any effort to engage in public problem-solving is inherently uncertain. Coalitions work in contexts that are highly contingent, dynamic ecosystems of their own. They often lack control and have to quickly respond to unanticipated changes. And payoff is not guaranteed.

This report synthesizes research across a broad range of scholarly fields to assess what we know—and do not know—about building and maintaining effective coalitions. The research shows that there is no silver bullet or formula for building a successful coalition. It does, however, point to the conditions that make it more likely for people and organizations to work together effectively.

Based on the literature, we argue that the key to effective, resilient coalitions is good coalition architecture (see Figure 1). The central features of good coalition architecture are: (a) democratic governance; (b) processes that facilitate continuous learning, adaptability, and flexibility; and (c) clarity about roles and practices to nurture trusting relationships.

Coalition architecture supports effectiveness and resilience by putting clear, equitable practices into place. Those building blocks facilitate coalition members’ commitment to the group and trust in one another, build members’ sense of their individual and collective agency, and deepen their investment in the coalition’s future.

\(^2\) Ansell and Gash 2008; Margerum 2002
To unpack these ideas, we examine what coalitions are and why coalition architecture is important to making them work. Guided by existing multidisciplinary research, we summarize themes that appeared consistently in these studies (see Appendix A for a description of the research methodology behind this report). We finish with a discussion of potential pitfalls and questions related to evaluation and measurement.

Figure 1. The Building Blocks of Effective, Resilient Coalitions

The Push and Pull of Coalitions

Coalitions include many types of partnerships among individuals and groups of people, such as civic associations, social movements, governmental actors, community leaders, companies, political organizations, funders, and more. They form because the people and groups involved hope to collaborate to achieve greater impact together than they could achieve alone. Not all coalitions look or work in the same ways. They differ in focus, form, and functionality. Sometimes participating groups combine to create a new, formally constituted organization in and of itself. Other coalitions remain informal arrangements between groups, sustained by ongoing working arrangements over the course of years. Still others adopt some hybrid of both. Coalitions can involve just two groups or require coordination among dozens of separate entities. Huge variation exists across these and other dimensions of the types of organizations involved, the features and forms that coalitions create, and the commitment asked of participants.

When they work well, coalitions can be a powerful tool. They can help bring about social and political change, and once enacted, help those changes stick by building buy-in from a range of stakeholders. Coalitions can also strengthen the individuals and groups involved by providing or amplifying material and non-material resources. However, coalitions can also be messy, frustrating, and time-intensive—and they
do not always achieve their goals. What pulls individuals and groups into coalition, and what pushes them away?

The Pull: Why Are Coalitions Important?

Despite the challenges inherent to coalition work, there are many reasons that organizations continue to build and participate in coalitions. When individual organizations face challenging and complex social problems without coordinating with other stakeholders, they are rarely able to generate meaningful change. This is especially true when stakeholders hold differing ideas about the problems’ root causes and solutions.

Coalitions can not only increase the likelihood of short-term wins but can also make those changes more durable. A wide body of research demonstrates that, absent robust coalition support, political changes are often fragile and short-lived. Without coalitions to hold leaders accountable during policy implementation, a policy can “drift” over time, reverting backward in such a way that it reflects the underlying power dynamics that the coalition was trying to change.

Research shows that coalitions can also strengthen their participating organizations. In fact, researcher and organizer Amanda Tattersall finds that coalitions work best when they “operat[e] in a way that builds organizational strength for their participating organizations.”

Coalition work can strengthen a member organization by expanding its material and non-material resources and by increasing its legitimacy in the eyes of public officials it works to persuade. Being in coalition pays dividends in several other ways: it deepens member organizations’ relationships and social networks; widens their reach within a community; improves their access to information; multiplies their tactical and strategic toolkits; and builds credibility and influence. Further, coalitions help member organizations demonstrate their worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC), a set of concepts scholars argue are key to building effective social movements. Perhaps less visibly, coalitions also shape the narrative frames that help cultivate shared public understandings of problems as well as the goals and objectives of their efforts. These material and non-material advantages build individual organizations’ stability and increase their flexibility amid uncertain and fast-paced environments. In short, coalitions can build more collective power than individual member organizations can achieve alone.

---

3 Conklin 2006
4 Conklin 2006
5 Tattersall 2020 p. 3
7 E. Ostrom 2000b; Cohen, Baer, and Satterwhite 2002; Mix 2011; Staggenborg 1998; Clarke and MacDonald 2019; Levine 2022
8 Tilly 2019
9 Tilly 2019
The Push: What Makes Coalitions Challenging?

As anyone who has participated in a coalition knows, working collectively with others poses inevitable difficulties. Coalitions encompass all of the uncertainty, idiosyncrasies, contradictions, and complexities of any human effort. Individuals and organizations bring their own skillsets, resources, expectations, norms, and theories of change to coalitions. Bridging these differences can be challenging and tense, sometimes even fracturing the coalition.11

Thus, there are many situations in which coalitions may not be the right solution. For example, if a situation requires a quick response, forming a new coalition may not be the best solution. Whereas single organizations can be efficient and nimble, coordinating multiple groups can become unwieldy.12 In situations that require intensive, singular focus, a coalition may similarly not be ideal; it might be easier for a single group with established interests to focus on one issue or strategy.13 Finally, if a coalition with similar goals already exists in the community, it may be more strategic to join the existing one.14

Sources of tension within a coalition can include:

- **Distinct theories of change**: Theories of change refer to the beliefs people hold about how and why change occurs. For example, consider the typical distinctions between organizations that use insider strategies and those that use outsider strategies. Organizations using insider strategies leverage financial resources, negotiating and lobbying expertise, ties to elected officials, and legitimacy among people in official positions of power.15 Organizations using outsider strategies, on the other hand, leverage resources outside the established political system, such as a committed grassroots base, legitimacy among that base, insight into community context, and the ability to generate local political responsiveness.16 Some organizations (often the most effective ones) use both.17 Balancing insider and outsider strategies can expand a coalition’s power—but also create tension.18

- **Unequal levels of political power**: Organizations enter coalitions with unequal levels of political power. Sociologists argue that the groups wielding greater political power tend to hold outsized leadership roles within a coalition, excluding traditionally marginalized communities from those same roles and opportunities. This tendency is called the iron law of oligarchy.19 In the context of a coalition, the iron law of oligarchy can create distrust, produce fissures, and lead to decision-making disconnected from the realities within at-risk communities.

---

12 Cohen, Baer, and Satterwhite 2002
13 Cohen, Baer, and Satterwhite 2002
14 Cohen, Baer, and Satterwhite 2002
15 Cress and Snow 1996; Rootes 2013; Staggenborg 1986; Mix 2011; Walker and McCarthy 2010; Buday 2019
16 Walker 2012; Neville and Weinthal 2016; Skocpol and Williamson 2015; Karpf 2012; Rayner and Bonnici 2021; McAdam and Boudet 2012; Bosso 2005
17 Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2020
18 Staggenborg 1991
19 Levine 2022; Michels 1911; Strolovitch 2007
Free-riding: Free-riding plagues any effort to create collective action. Free-riding refers to the fact that individuals (or individual organizations) can reap the benefits of another individual or group’s work even though they contribute little to no effort of their own. Coalitions are often susceptible to free-riding because of the time and effort coalitions require from their members. Research shows that both coalition leaders and members often underestimate the commitment required to build and maintain an effective coalition. In these circumstances, the temptation to free-ride can be strong. Particularly in large coalitions, people can shirk their individual responsibilities without consequence. This tendency to free-ride limits the coalition’s ability to achieve its goals.

Uncertain outcomes: Even well-designed coalitions fail to achieve all their goals. Individuals and groups have to make the choice to join without knowing whether all the time and effort expended will be worthwhile.

Reduced autonomy: When organizations join coalitions, they forfeit autonomy in setting goals, developing strategy, and claiming credit. Constituency-based groups, in particular, are often at risk of being sidelined in developing the coalition’s goals and direction. When they rely too heavily on better-funded coalition partners, they can lose independence to pursue their organizational needs and goals. Coalition work also requires sharing credit, which can seem like a risk in environments where organizations compete for funds.

Uncomfortable bedfellows: When organizations join coalitions, they may need to work with organizations that either their staff or their constituency would rather avoid. Reasons for hesitation abound: disagreement over policy or priorities, for instance, or difficulty in previous coalitions. For these and a host of other reasons, a group’s staff or constituency might challenge the organization joining forces with others.

Given the push and pull of coalitions, they can sometimes feel like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they are crucial to any effort to solve complex public problems, and are necessary for creating the long-term commitment, relationships, and resources needed to sustain public solutions over time. On the other hand, efforts to build and manage them can be unpredictable, conflictual, and fraught with politics. Making intentional choices about coalition architecture is one way to balance the push and pull of coalitions.

Focusing on Coalition Architecture: Why Design and Leadership Matter

Coalition architecture refers to the design of the structures, processes, and practices that determine how a set of diverse groups with divergent interests make decisions, share information, distribute power, build relationships, and forge agreements. This architecture can shape people’s trust, sense of agency, commitment, buy-in and, ultimately, the coalition’s success or failure.

20 Cohen, Baer, and Satterwhite 2002
21 Olson 1965
22 Olson 1965
23 Pfeffer and Salancik 2003; Staggenborg 1986; Buday 2019
24 McCammon and Campbell 2002
25 E. Ostrom 1990; Staggenborg 2015; Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2006; Alexander, Comfort, and Weiner 1998; Szule, Pattberg, and Biermann 2011
Political scientist Elinor Ostrom was the first woman to ever win the Nobel Prize in Economics. Her work demonstrated that the design of the “institutions” people built to solve shared problems determined whether they would be able to overcome the dilemmas of collective action.26 Many of her insights on institutional design are relevant for the way we think about coalition architecture. At its core, her work demonstrates that well-designed architecture can create the conditions necessary for people to overcome the dilemmas of collective action and work together effectively.27

The Importance of Design

Why does design matter? The way coalitions are designed shapes the incentives individuals and organizations in the coalition have and creates the venues they need to work productively together. In many cases, coalition architecture determines the extent to which coalitions are able to generate the intangible resources they need to succeed, like buy-in, commitment, trust, and a sense of individual and collective agency.28

These are resources that cannot be mandated or artificially created. Even in situations where stakeholders desperately want to make a coalition work, there is no magic wand that makes trust appear out of thin air. Imagine telling a stakeholder, “Oh, I know the solution. Just trust me.” Or, alternately, “The answer is clear. You just have to trust this person you’ve opposed for many years.” Instead, coalitions need to nurture those intangible resources (buy-in, commitment, trust, and agency) from the bottom-up.

Fostering the conditions for these intangibles to develop is neither easy nor straightforward. How can coalition stakeholders nurture buy-in, commitment, trust, and sense of agency such that people want to be part of the coalition? The temptation is often to pursue shortcuts that avoid complexity and remove uncertainty. For instance, paying people and organizations to participate in a coalition minimizes the opportunity costs and risks of participation. While such material resources are important, relying on them or other external, top-down interventions often fails to generate the relational components a coalition needs to succeed.

Rather than passively waiting for a successful coalition to emerge or imposing a top-down approach, evidence suggests stakeholders focus instead on the structures and practices that the coalition puts into place to organize itself, its work, and its relationships. Whether coalitions operate in politics, business, or interpersonal social situations, research finds that choices around architecture determine a coalition’s capacity to generate the four key factors: buy-in, commitment, trust, and a sense of individual and collective agency.29 For instance, research suggests that when coalitions equitably give members opportunities for voice and incorporate a wider range of knowledge, they are better-functioning, more resilient, and produce better outcomes.30 We argue, in other words, that a coalition’s strength and resilience comes neither from the amount of money poured in nor the prestige of

26 E. Ostrom 1990. In Ostrom’s work, “institutions” are socially created constraints on human action.
27 For instance, one design feature Ostrom examines has to do with clear decision-making processes. She argues that clear processes build norms and expectations that make coalition members better able to predict each other’s behavior. When members can predict others’ behavior, they make better decisions and produce better outcomes.
28 E. Ostrom 1990; Rayner and Bonnici 2021; Ansell and Gash 2008; Gray and Stites 2013; Levine 2022
29 E. Ostrom 1990; Rayner and Bonnici 2021; Levine 2022
The players involved. Instead, coalition resilience comes from choices about a coalition’s architecture.

The Role of Leadership

Coalition architecture depends on leaders who enable members to collectively make choices about what to do, how to do it, whom to engage, how to engage them, and so on. Sometimes called “brokers” or “entrepreneurs,” leaders play an important role in designing and implementing a coalition’s architecture.31 We use the word “leader” because we draw on Marshall Ganz’s definition of leader as someone who “accept[s] [the] responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty.” Coalition leaders are not the people who do all the work or take all the credit. Instead, leaders design, manage, and implement the coalition architecture in a way that enables others to collectively achieve their shared goals and navigate the inevitable complexity and unpredictability of a coalition.

A coalition’s architectural decisions can be broadly categorized into three key buckets:

- **Governance:** Governance refers to the systems and mechanisms that a group uses to organize itself, distribute power, make decisions, and hold itself accountable to those decisions. Coalitions have many decisions to make. They have to establish the group’s purpose, goals, and strategy. What outcome are they seeking? What compromises are they willing to accept? When is the right time to pivot to a different strategy? Coalitions must also make decisions about internal rules, including community agreements that govern the way coalition members interact with one another and the outside world. Core to governance are the decision-making structures that determine how authority, information, and resources flow within the coalition. Governance answers the questions, “Who decides what? Who gets what?” 32

- **Learning and Adaptability:** Because coalitions work in unpredictable, dynamic contexts, they need practices for gathering information, making meaning of that information, and integrating what they learn. Learning is about answering questions like, “Why? What’s it all about? What are we noticing? What’s working (or not) in the current context? Is the context changing?” 33

- **Roles and Relationships:** A complex endeavor like a coalition requires multiple people taking on discrete pieces of work. Clearly defined roles and ritualized interactions organize that work and build trust. That clarity means that stakeholders know who is doing what and trust that partners will follow through. Decisions about roles and relationships answer the questions, “Who does what? What connects to whom? Who belongs to what?” 34 Well-functioning coalitions often have specific people (sometimes paid staff) who are responsible for coordinating the coalition—but not in a way that disempowers other members of the coalition. 35 The roles and responsibilities of these leaders can vary:

---

31 Ganz 2010 p. 1
32 Nilsson 2019
33 Nilsson 2019
34 Nilsson 2019
35 Tattersall 2020; Szulecki, Pattberg, and Biermann 2011; Wolff 2001a
Designing Resilient Coalitions

Developing and implementing a strong coalition design is time consuming. Practitioners who have studied these processes argue that it is important to “slow down to go fast” and “start with the process in mind.” The early and ongoing design choices that coalitions make matter for outcomes. By collectively creating clear structures and practices up front and managing them throughout the life of a coalition, coalitions can function better and be more resilient. Below, we synthesize key research about the kinds of design choices coalition leaders can facilitate around governance, learning, and relationships.

**Conditions That Make Coalitions More Likely to Succeed**

If the key design choices that coalition leaders make are about governance, learning, and roles and relationships, then research points to specific characteristics of those choices that make coalitions more likely to succeed. In particular, coalitions are more likely to achieve their goals if they adopt structures that support: (1) democratic governance; (2) real-time learning loops and flexibility; and (3) clear roles and trusting relationships. Each of these helps build the intangible resources necessary for effective collective action: buy-in, commitment, trust, and a sense of individual and collective agency.

**Democratic Governance**

Democratic governance refers to processes that provide opportunities for all key stakeholders to have voice. Rather than having the same group of leaders make all decisions on the coalition’s behalf, democratic governance can put participating organizations on equal footing in decision-making. Research finds that coalitions that democratize decision-making function more smoothly and are more resilient. Members feel more empowered to contribute to the coalition’s direction, strategy, and future. By contrast, unilateral action undermines trust.

Any multi-stakeholder coalition involves people and organizations who sometimes disagree over strategy, goals, tactics, and so on. Democratic practices about how these disagreements should be navigated—even absent consensus—can distribute power more equally among organizations. Without authentic democratic governance, coalition work often feels like going through empty motions, where people’s input is requested but not seriously considered. Working intentionally to develop sound governance practices involves balancing power more equitably and establish clear and transparent decision-making and accountability structures. When done well, these governance practices should remove false pageantry and create greater trust and buy-in.

36 Rayner and Bonnici 2021
37 Rayner and Bonnici 2021 p. 65
38 Rayner and Bonnici 2021 p. 37
39 Staggenborg 2015; Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2006; Szulecki, Pattberg, and Biermann 2011; Thomson and Perry 2006
40 E. Ostrom 1990; Rayner and Bonnici 2021; Tattersall 2005; Snowden and Rancati 2021; Levine 2022
41 Ariño and de la Torre 1998
Some key benefits of incorporating democratization into governance practices include:

- **Increased Commitment**: When coalition members feel that they are authentically involved in the decisions that directly impact them as individuals and as members of a group, they are more willing to commit to the coalition and one another.\(^{42}\) Developing that sense of agency among coalition members is key to making collective action powerful.

- **More Informed Outcomes**: Research finds that democratic decision-making mechanisms (rather than centralized or top-down mechanisms) help coalitions arrive at better-informed outcomes.\(^{43}\) Compared to centralized decision-making, democratic decision-making incorporates the knowledge of a wider range of coalition members. This expands both the sources of and what counts as “knowledge,” a shift that is critical to integrating groups that have been historically excluded from parts of political life. The inclusion of BIPOC, working-class, religious minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities in decision-making processes, for example, ensures better-informed decisions that resonate with a broader range of communities.

- **More Resilient Outcomes**: Democratic decision-making helps develop more resilient outcomes because it creates ex ante buy-in from key players. When people collectively develop and implement rules and decisions they had a part in building, they are more likely to continue upholding those processes for collective action over time.\(^{44}\)

There is no one-size-fits-all structure for democratic governance. Instead, coalitions need to consider how to develop clear mechanisms in four key areas that we elaborate on below:

- **Balanced distribution of power**
- **Decision-making**
- **Transparency and information-sharing**
- **Accountability and conflict resolution**

Whether a coalition is developing its strategy or deciding how to create and implement these components of governance, the process should not be top-down. They should be created collaboratively, with everyone affected by these systems contributing to their design.

**BALANCE THE DISTRIBUTION OF POWER IN THE COALITION**

Coalitions often bring together diverse organizations with unequal levels of power and different relationships to the problem in question. Without explicit choices about how to rebalance power, the coalition can replicate pre-existing power differences.\(^{45}\) Researchers find that organizations that enter the coalition with greater power, resources, and legitimacy tend to exercise more power and are more likely to hold leadership roles.\(^{46}\) Importantly, this means that less powerful groups—which often include people in the coalition closest to the problem that the coalition is trying to address—get excluded from the decision-making process.

It is essential that less powerful groups and those closest to the problem have a say in the coalition's

---

42 Korsgaard, Schweiger, and Sapienza 1995; Colquitt et al. 2001; Ansell and Gash 2008
43 E. Ostrom 1990
44 E. Ostrom 2000a
45 Cheyns and Riisgaard 2014; Ansell and Gash 2008; Levine 2022
46 Agranoff and Mcguire 2001
decision-making, at all levels, for three main reasons. First, multiple studies find that incorporating input from a broad range of stakeholders results in better decision-making. Researchers argue that when dealing with complex, unpredictable issues, “the knowledge of many different stakeholders is important... Each stakeholder has important information about how their community is impacted and by what issues—perspectives which are needed to comprehend these types of problems, and thus appropriately address them.” Practitioners who have studied coalition building argue that people closest to the problem, called “primary actors,” have informed, hands-on knowledge of an environment and hold the expertise needed to make well-informed decisions that resonate with the community.

Second, including a broad range of stakeholders in decision-making builds commitment among those stakeholders. Democratic decision-making improves work satisfaction, enthusiasm, motivation, and organizational commitment, helping to attract and retain valued workers. In coalitions, researchers note that “only groups that feel they have had a legitimate opportunity to participate are likely to develop a ‘commitment to the process.’” Excluding groups from the decision-making process may reduce their commitment and involvement.

Third, when coalitions involve a balanced range of stakeholders in decision-making, they increase the perceived legitimacy and authority of their decisions.

Finally, when power imbalances between coalition members are left unaddressed, they can become a source of mistrust, conflict, and reduced commitment within the coalition. Such dynamics can threaten the coalition’s long-term viability.

Thus, to ensure stability and success over time, a coalition must build structures that balance power among multiple stakeholders, including primary actors. This means putting into place democratic governance practices that allow for equitable participation in charting the coalition’s direction, processes, and strategy.

Incorporating primary actors and other marginalized groups into governance starts by ensuring their representation in leadership positions. This includes equal roles in key decision-making bodies.

47 Dentoni, Bitzer, and Schouten 2018; Burns and Stalker 1961; Kelly and Moles 2002; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Futrell 2003
48 MacDonald, Clarke, and Huang 2019 p. 412; Owen and Videras 2008
49 Rayner and Bonnici 2021; Snowden and Rancati 2021
50 Driscoll 1978; Acorn, Ratner, and Crawford 1997; Yu and Kim 2011; Mena and Palazzo 2012
51 Driscoll 1978
52 Ansell and Gash 2008 p. 556
53 Merrill-Sands and Sheridan 1996
54 Boström 2006; Bäckstrand 2006; Ansell and Gash 2008; Beierle and Konisky 2001; Geoghegan and Renard 2002
55 Huxham and Vangen 2013; Fox and Gershman 2000; Gray 1989
56 Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2006; Gray and Stites 2013; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
57 Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Levine 2022
including committees, associations, working groups, and legislative groups.\textsuperscript{58} In multiracial and cross-class coalitions, where power differences are often greater, representing all groups in leadership roles can help bridge divides.\textsuperscript{59} One researcher suggests rotating leadership to reduce oligarchy (rule by a few) and free-riding (shirking responsibilities) by making “everyone a leader who needs others’ support, and then a follower for whom contributing is burdensome, and then a leader again.”\textsuperscript{60}

**Key questions to ask yourself about your coalition:**

- Are primary actors involved in decision-making related to both process and strategy?
- Is power distributed in a way that recognizes and attempts to address power imbalances?

### CREATE CLEAR MECHANISMS FOR DECISION-MAKING

There are many ways to make decisions in a group. The research does not identify a single decision-making structure that is better than the others. Instead, the key is to have a clear decision-making process that all coalition members are aware of, understand, and use consistently.\textsuperscript{61} That clarity allows all partner organizations to understand who is making which decisions and how they are doing so. Common systems include:

- **Consensus**, where 100\% of members must agree on an outcome. Consensus incorporates the voices of all group members—but also makes it more likely that the group will uphold the status quo.
- **Majority rule**, where 50\% of members plus one must agree on an outcome. Majority rule makes creating change easier but can sideline groups with less representation in the coalition.
- **Supermajority rule**, where the group decides on a threshold for making a decision that is something other than 50\%, such as two-thirds agreement.
- **“Consent-based” decision making**, which involves a clear decision-maker(s) who is responsible for making decisions but works with coalition members to ensure that decisions are within their “range of tolerance.”

Whatever decision-making structure is in place, that structure should: (1) be made clear to and understood by all coalition members; (2) be used consistently; and, (3) equitably incorporate the input of all coalition members. Well-established norms around decision-making ease the burden of making decisions, especially in the face of unexpected or rapidly changing external events.\textsuperscript{62}

**Key questions to ask yourself about your coalition:**

- What system of decision-making do you use? What are its pros and cons?
- Are all coalition members aware of this system? Do they understand this system?
- Does your coalition use this system consistently?

\textsuperscript{58} Rayner and Bonnici 2021 p. 119
\textsuperscript{59} Levine 2022
\textsuperscript{60} Levine 2022 p. 126. He suggests that rotating leadership can be accomplished through random selection of short-term leaders.
\textsuperscript{61} Dentoni, Bitzer, and Schouten 2018; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
\textsuperscript{62} Levine 2022
CREATE TRANSPARENT MECHANISMS FOR INFORMATION-SHARING

A key part of any governance structure is information-sharing. For people to be able to make good decisions, they need information—about what is going on in the coalition, the topic under consideration, and what other coalition members are doing. In general, scholars agree that the more transparent information can be, the better.

By making actions public, transparency increases social pressure on coalition members to meet the collective commitments they have made to one another. That means members know that others can see whether they uphold (or fail to uphold) their own commitments. For example, consider a lobbyist in a coalition who is supposed to check in with specific stakeholders before holding a lobbying meeting. If coalition members do not know that the meeting is happening, they have no way of monitoring whether the lobbyist first checked in with the appropriate stakeholders. With transparent information, coalition members become less likely to shirk their responsibilities. Transparently sharing information and knowledge also builds awareness, legitimacy, and commitment, which increases the coalition’s overall functionality and efficacy.

Some researchers suggest that transparency be built into daily routines to ensure that it happens reliably and at low cost. For example, it can be useful for coalitions to adopt norms around the timely sharing of meeting notes or other documents through specific channels. This gives people a chance to respond and react in near real-time. Additionally, coalition members (including leadership) should regularly report out their own actions, and there should be clear processes for doing so. These practices may feel onerous but can go a long way toward building trust across the coalition.

Key questions to ask yourself about your coalition:

• What kinds of mechanisms does your coalition use to create transparency?
• Are these mechanisms incorporated into your coalition’s daily routines? If not, can they be?
• Are there decisions, tactics or processes that are not transparent within your coalition? If yes, what mechanisms can be put in place to improve transparency?
• Does transparency exist at all levels of your coalition, including in leadership?

CREATE CLEAR, EASY-TO-USE MECHANISMS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Once coalitions make decisions, they need clear mechanisms for holding themselves accountable to those choices as well as resolving conflict when coalition members break informal norms and/or agreed-upon

63 E. Ostrom 1990
64 E. Ostrom 1990
65 Wolff 2001a; Ansell and Gash 2008; Bäckstrand 2006; Mena and Palazzo 2012
66 E. Ostrom 1990
67 Levine 2022
We call these mechanisms accountability mechanisms, but they are sometimes referred to as conflict resolution mechanisms or sanctioning mechanisms. While transparency allows group members to know whether others have broken agreements, accountability mechanisms impose “sanctions” for breaking those agreements. Ostrom finds that the ability to “sanction” reduces problems of collective action, such as free-riding. Further, she finds that “when participants themselves agree to a sanctioning system, they frequently do not need to use sanctions at a high volume and net benefits can be improved substantially.” In other words, simply working collectively to develop an accountability system reduces free-riding and minimizes the need to sanction. Top-down sanctions, by contrast, can reduce cooperation and harm coalition efficacy.

The goal of accountability mechanisms is not to make those who violate the rules feel rejected. Instead, accountability mechanisms should incentivize fulfilling commitments and upholding the coalition’s agreed-upon practices. As such, many coalitions adopt a system of graduated sanctions. This means that when people or organizations first violate the coalition’s community agreements, they receive mild sanctions. But repeated violations result in increasingly strong sanctions. Starting with mild sanctions (e.g., naming the person/organization that fell short of their commitments in a meeting) allows people or organizations to make a mistake or fail to deliver on a task, recover, and be welcomed back fully into the group.

Identifying why a violation occurred and how to restore trust is another way to ensure accountability. For example, if a coalition member lobbies a legislator on a policy that the coalition had not collectively agreed upon, the coalition member may be asked to clarify with the legislator and/or required to have other coalition members join for future meetings. If there is interpersonal harm, the harmed member should be empowered to suggest accountability that feels restorative, such as having the offender take a break from the coalition or publicly acknowledge the harm caused. These mechanisms should be relatively easy to use and should resolve problems quickly. They should be designed so that “[p]eople can get clear resolutions with minimal effort.”

---

**Key questions to ask yourself about your coalition:**

- Does your coalition have clear, easy-to-use accountability mechanisms?
- Are all coalition members familiar with these mechanisms?
- Do the accountability mechanisms start with mild sanctions and become increasingly strict for repeated violations?
- Are accountability mechanisms focused on restoring trust?
- Were the mechanisms created collectively? If not, how can you increase coalition-wide ownership over these mechanisms?

---

68 Gray and Stites 2013; Dentoni, Bitzer, and Schouten 2018; Bäckstrand 2006; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Ariño and de la Torre 1998

69 E. Ostrom 1990

70 E. Ostrom 2010 p. 662

71 E. Ostrom 2010

72 E. Ostrom 1990

73 E. Ostrom 1990; Levine 2022

74 E. Ostrom 1990; Levine 2022

75 Levine 2022 p. 124
Real-Time Learning Loops and Flexibility

Coalitions operate in uncertain political environments that are dynamic and complex—in addition to the complex collective coordination that coalition work demands. Consequently, coalitions need to continually assess and re-assess the external political context, internal coalition dynamics, and what’s working and what is not.\textsuperscript{76} Creating a nimble and responsive coalition requires building mechanisms for learning, which often involves quickly gathering new data, making meaning from that data, sharing insights from that data, and applying those insights to decision-making.\textsuperscript{77} These learning feedback loops allow coalitions to quickly adapt and respond to ever-evolving external conditions and internal dynamics.\textsuperscript{78}

**EMBED LEARNING PROCESSES INTO THE COALITION’S REGULAR ROUTINES**

Business and management researchers emphasize that learning feedback loops should be built into the foundation of the coalition’s workflows—not added post-hoc at the end of a campaign. The purpose of learning feedback loops is to increase the coalition’s knowledge and responsiveness, rather than to assess the coalition’s efficacy after the fact—as often happens for a funder report or in planning for future campaigns. As practitioners Rayner and Bonnici write: “[m]easurement [should]…be embedded in systems work as a practice, not just to prove successful outcomes but as part of the overall learning process of organizations and broader collectives.”\textsuperscript{79}

Learning often begins by building mechanisms to collect the information or data to assess if a strategy is working as intended. Then, the coalition needs a system for making sense of that data and information. To complete the feedback loop, that learning needs to be shared widely and integrated into practice. Admittedly, sticking to these loops in the heat of a campaign can be challenging. Perceiving data collection and collective analysis as cumbersome, coalitions often rely only on post-hoc evaluations. Scholars argue, however, that “retrospective learning is deeply suspect, as hindsight is always mediated by selective memory and by the political needs of the present … if [you] haven’t already got systems in place for realtime capture of lessons as they are learnt, together with ideas for innovation, [you] need to get them in place fast.”\textsuperscript{80}

To make learning possible, coalition members need to be willing not only to collect data but also to use it. They need to be willing to be flexible—to adapt and change course if the learning suggests that new strategies or practices are needed. Especially after failures, data collected from learning feedback loops can help to reassess and regroup.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{76} Dentoni, Bitzer, and Schouten 2018; Termeer et al. 2015; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
\textsuperscript{77} Rayner and Bonnici 2021
\textsuperscript{78} Rayner and Bonnici 2021
\textsuperscript{79} Rayner and Bonnici 2021 p. 140
\textsuperscript{80} Snowden and Rancati 2021 p. 26-27
\textsuperscript{81} Crosby and Bryson 2005b
In sum, when coalitions incorporate learning feedback loops into their daily practices and engage members at all levels of the coalition in the learning process (as described in the following section), learning becomes institutionalized. This legwork not only allows the coalition to quickly learn and grow but also makes it easier to measure efficacy more accurately when the campaign is over.

**INVOLVE PEOPLE AT ALL LEVELS OF THE COALITION IN THE LEARNING PROCESS**

Coalitions can more easily institutionalize learning feedback loops, improve learning, and build agency by involving people at all levels of the coalition in the learning process. Some researchers recommend that “knowledge-sharing [and] experience-gathering… happen both vertically and horizontally” so that all parts of the coalition have the opportunity to contribute to learning. One way to make feedback loops accessible is to create spaces where coalition members meet and examine (and reexamine) the coalition’s mission, goals, strategy, and activities. Leaders can serve as coordinators in these spaces. Asking “What’s going on? What are you noticing?” instead of simply “What worked?” broadens the conversation and avoids prematurely limiting the arena of focus. Data and knowledge uncovered through these processes should be made user-friendly and shared widely.

Practices such as journaling exercises also provide important insight into organizational experience and provide real-time feedback without requiring expertise. Some business management researchers suggest that members ritualize their personal journaling, even writing morning and evening if events move rapidly. Data created by journaling should be made widely available to coalition members.

**Key questions to ask yourself about your coalition:**

- Does your coalition have practices in place for learning and iterating?
- Do these practices operate in real-time, and are they integrated into the coalition’s regular work?
- Are all coalition members able to participate in learning practices?
- Do you have processes for sharing learnings widely within your coalition?
- Are there processes for incorporating learning into your work and adapting strategy?

**Clear Roles and Relationships that Facilitate Trust**

Clear roles and trusting relationships are not just nice to have but are essential building blocks for effective coalition work. They not only make coalition work more pleasant but also lead to better functioning, resilient coalitions. Clarity around people’s own and others’ roles, as well as relationships based in trust that others will reciprocate behaviors, increase cooperation and efficiency while reducing free-riding.

---

82 Rayner and Bonnici 2021 p. 102
83 Dentoni, Bitzer, and Schouten 2018
84 Wolff 2001a; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
85 Rayner and Bonnici 2021
86 Rayner and Bonnici 2021
87 Snowden and Rancati 2021
89 E. Ostrom 2010; Tsai and Ghoshal 1998; Wicks, Berman, and Jones 1999
Of course, clarity about roles and trusting relationships do not grow out of nothing. They must be continuously cultivated. Being explicit about who is in and out of a coalition, who does what in a coalition, and facilitating repeated, regular interaction builds trust. Through clear roles and repeated interaction, people begin to see and understand one another’s behaviors. They collectively create social norms and expectations that govern how coalition members interact. These norms and expectations make it possible for people to predict one another’s behavior, which increases trust: If you do X, you can reliably count on other coalition members to do Y.

The democratic governance structures that we’ve already discussed also nurture trusting relationships. Democratic governance can make coalition members feel that they and their contributions are valued. Transparency and accountability can build trust among coalition members by making clear whether others are upholding their agreements. In the next section we’ll discuss other coalition features that can also foster trusting relationships.

**ESTABLISH CLARITY ABOUT WHO IS PART OF THE COALITION**

The first question to ask in establishing clear roles is a question about boundaries. Coalition members need to set clearly defined boundaries around who is in and who is out. Boundaries determine who the coalition represents, to whom it is accountable, and who has authority for decision-making. Thus, having explicit agreements about “who is involved and in what capacity” is essential for effective collaboration.

Coalitions often claim to represent and be accountable to a large and amorphous base. In an effort to be more inclusive, they can be reluctant to draw boundaries. But claims of representation without mechanisms for inclusion prevent accountability. Similarly, sudden shifts in stakeholders can blindside existing members.

Deciding who should be included in the coalition begins with a stakeholder analysis. This involves identifying the range of groups affected by the problem and those that can provide access to key resources. Coalition builders should then work to identify each group’s interests and priorities. Where does their self-interest lie? Identifying groups’ self-interests can help coalition builders develop a sense of what (potentially conflicting) expectations the different groups may have of the coalition’s process and goals. This can provide needed clarity on the pros and cons of inviting different groups into the coalition.

There are trade-offs when it comes to decisions about the number of groups involved and the breadth of constituents represented in a coalition. Researchers argue that smaller coalitions — meaning those with fewer organizations involved — can more easily develop a shared agenda to which all members are committed. Having fewer member organizations also increases the kinds of interactions that cultivate close relationships among groups and individuals. By contrast, including a large number of organizations

---

90 Ring and van de Ven 1994  
91 E. Ostrom 2010  
92 E. Ostrom 2010  
93 E. Ostrom 1990  
94 E. Ostrom 1990  
95 Roberts and Bradley 1991  
96 Bryson 2004  
97 Bryson 2004; Crosby and Bryson 2005a  
98 Tattersall 2020  
99 Tattersall 2020
can pose challenges to learning as well as limit opportunities to build cross-organizational relationships.\textsuperscript{100}

Despite the benefits of smaller coalitions, researchers find that broader, more inclusive coalitions (when they are well-designed and executed) are most effective. \textit{Breadth does not necessarily mean larger, i.e., that the coalition includes a greater number of groups. Rather, it means including a full range of groups impacted by the problem. As one scholar phrases it, the ideal is, “a broad enough spectrum of stakeholders to mirror the problem.”}\textsuperscript{101} That breadth is essential for the coalition’s legitimacy, specifically its ability to claim that the coalition’s demands reflect a broad-based consensus.\textsuperscript{102}

Researchers argue that even “potentially ‘troublesome’ stakeholders” be invited into the coalition,\textsuperscript{103} including those with the most power and influence.\textsuperscript{104} Excluding critical stakeholders, particularly powerful and influential ones, can lead to reduced efficacy and coalition failure.\textsuperscript{105}

While larger and better-resourced groups are important, coalitions must include community-based and grassroots groups as well. For example, in bringing together a multiracial coalition, researchers suggest involving a diverse range of locally-based grassroots groups with the backing of the communities they seek to represent.\textsuperscript{106}

When bringing different types of organizations to the table, it is helpful to have brokers.\textsuperscript{107} These are people who can build bridges across different types of groups. Brokers often occupy social positions at the intersections of various groups and can leverage their connections to bring people to the table. However, brokers can also be less-connected actors with perceived legitimacy in the eyes of potential coalition partners.\textsuperscript{108} Brokers’ work involves “bringing people to the table, mitigating diverging opinions, and driving the difficult start-up process forward.”\textsuperscript{109}

\section*{EMBED THE COALITION ORGANICALLY IN THE CONSTITUENCY}

Coalitions are most successful when they draw on the self-interest of the individuals, community, and organizations involved.\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Engaging a constituency’s interests depends on embedding the coalition within that constituency.} These coalitions often emerge in response to unmet constituency needs, a no-longer-sustainable status quo, or to help the constituency prepare for the future.\textsuperscript{111}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{100} MacDonald, Clarke, and Huang 2019
\bibitem{101} Gray 1989 p. 68
\bibitem{102} Ansell and Gash 2008
\bibitem{103} Ansell and Gash 2008 p. 556
\bibitem{104} Pattberg and Widerberg 2016; Beisheim 2012; Newell, Pattberg, and Schroeder 2012
\bibitem{105} Gray 2007; Pattberg and Widerberg 2016; Reilly 2001; Ansell and Gash 2008
\bibitem{106} Diaz-Veizades and Chang 1996
\bibitem{107} Tattersall 2020; Glasbergen 2010; Gray 2007
\bibitem{108} McAdam and Boudet 2012
\bibitem{109} Pattberg and Widerberg 2016 p. 47
\bibitem{110} Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2006
\bibitem{111} Wolff 2001a; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
\end{thebibliography}
Coalitions do not need to start from scratch when bringing people to the table. Rather, they should build on the organic social networks and institutions that already exist within the community. People spend their lives embedded in overlapping social networks (both physical and digital), creating deep social ties. Coalitions can and should tap into these societal institutions, organizations, networks, and spaces. This strategy is helpful to coalitions because: 1) it brings in networks of people, rather than individuals; 2) networked people have already established a baseline trust with one another;112 3) people join and remain in social movements based on relationships;113 4) embeddedness within a network of relationships—rather than a single relationship, such as one between a volunteer and an organizer—is what builds commitment and group resiliency;114 and, 5) drawing from pre-existing networks strengthens ties to the community.

Coalitions often work best when they draw on organic leaders, or people who are already well-respected within a constituency. Organic leaders are influential and trusted constituency members, the people who others within the constituency turn to for advice and support. Organic leaders need not necessarily hold official positions but are “central nodes” of their social networks—people who are deeply embedded within their communities, hold multiple social ties, and are often the center of relational interactions. Constituents may be willing to follow them, if asked, into political participation.115 Organic leaders may not be the constituents who are most vocal about a political campaign or issue. They may initially hold neutral views or hesitate to get involved. But if they can be persuaded to support an issue, they can bring many others along.116

**CREATE SPACE FOR REGULAR, MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS**

Even in this era of easy social interactions on social media and via email, more sustained regular interactions (especially in-person) are an essential method for promoting relationship-building, trust, and cooperation.117 Repeated interaction improves the chances that a person can predict the choices others will make. This allows individuals to calibrate their own actions to achieve positive outcomes.118 Repeated interaction also creates shared norms, expectations, and understandings. These include establishing the acceptability (and unacceptability) of backing out of commitments and freeloading as well as clear norms for participation, member involvement, and meeting behavior.119 Without these norms, people act opportunistically, making it difficult to create and maintain stable, resilient coalitions. Shared norms mean coalition members can rely less on accountability processes and simply trust that others will reciprocate their contributions of time, effort, and resources.120

One way to foster repeated interaction is to hold informal opportunities for coalition members to interact socially.121 Some practitioners suggest holding casual, semi-structured in-person conversations, called “pooling.” Pooling was common in the second wave feminist movement; it involves creating spaces to discuss set topics of shared interest (e.g., employment, parenthood, abortion) among coalition members.

112 Bryson, Crosby, and Stone 2006
113 Blee 2002
114 Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2020
115 McAlevey 2016
116 McAlevey 2016
118 E. Ostrom 1990
119 Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
120 E. Ostrom 1990
121 Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
It creates a space for exploring and connecting, rather than expertise and instructing/teaching. These transformational—as opposed to transactional—conversations can help form connections between coalition members.\(^{122}\)

Rituals, including those that that revolve around celebration and play, help build and solidify social ties as well.\(^{123}\) Some researchers specifically highlight the importance of celebrating successes, big and small.\(^{124}\)

It is important to note that these relationships and the norms and trust they built can be undermined when external groups (e.g., funders or government officials) impose a top-down approach.\(^{125}\)

**ENABLE COLLABORATION IN SMALLER GROUPS**

Smaller groups allow coalition members to engage more regularly and develop personal relationships. This gives coalition members greater agency and opportunity to deepen trust. For large coalitions, creating smaller, nested groups can be especially helpful to build and maintain bonds.\(^{126}\)

Some management researchers find that groups of 20 or more people should be broken into smaller units for effective action.\(^{127}\) These researchers suggest using a 5/15/150 organization model. They argue that: five people (or fewer) is the upper limit for the most effective mission-oriented teams; 15 people is the natural limit for informal networks that are built on deep trust; and, 150 is the natural acquaintance limit where people know the capabilities of other group members and, as a result, can function more cohesively as a collective. However, people obviously hold relationships outside of coalitions (including with friends and family), and these relationships are included in the 150 limit. As a result, these scholars argue that 100 people is a good upper limit for the number of people in a coalition.

In general, small, mission-oriented teams are the backbone of an effective coalition’s structure. Each can be responsible for making decisions around specific topics or for coming up with options to present to the full coalition to decide. Although each team has a specialized purpose (described in greater detail below), a small unit should include varied skillsets and identities.\(^{128}\)

**CREATE CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Coalitions not only need to establish boundaries of who is in and who is out but also need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities that each member will take on to help the coalition achieve its purpose.\(^{129}\) In organizations, role clarity is associated with adaptability, work satisfaction, commitment, and involvement.\(^{130}\) Lack of clarity is associated with greater tension and anxiety, lack of participation, and higher rates of turnover.\(^{131}\) Because coalitions involve greater complexity and ambiguity than single organizations, clearly defining roles and responsibilities becomes especially important. In coalitions, clear roles and routines improve performance and help to build trust and collective identity, or a feeling of

---

122 Rayner and Bonnici 2021
123 Rayner and Bonnici 2021; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
124 Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
125 E. Ostrom 2000b; Levine 2022
126 E. Ostrom 1990
127 Snowden and Rancati 2021
128 Snowden and Rancati 2021
129 Alexander, Comfort, and Weiner 1998; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001
130 Hassan 2013; Jackson and Schuler 1985; Kauppila 2014
131 Hassan 2013; Jackson and Schuler 1985
belonging to the group.\textsuperscript{132} They help coalition members understand both their own roles and the roles of others, creating shared expectations around what is needed from each member to achieve collective goals.

Obviously, each coalition needs to identify the roles it needs. An example from teams focused on crisis management identifies the following roles be allocated to sub-groups, which they call “crews,” within the coalition:

- **Look-out:** The purpose of this crew is to look for “possible unintended consequences [of the coalition’s actions] and then monitor for both the expected and unexpected occurrences. Lookouts then create recommendations to mitigate any negative effects” and look for ways to “rapidly amplify unexpected positive results that might otherwise be missed.”\textsuperscript{133}

- **Journaler:** As with learning feedback loops, journaling is a simple way to capture real-time data that does not require expertise. It can be helpful to have a journaling crew to track thoughts, experiences, and ideas in real-time, including what is and is not working.

- **Continuity Lead:** This crew maintains day-to-day operations and ensures that systems run smoothly.

- **Data Analyst:** This crew analyzes and distributes findings from any quantitative data that the coalition tracks.

- **Healer:** The purpose of this crew is to monitor and support the overall well-being of the coalition. They may take attitudinal pulses of the coalition and support struggling members. Fighting for needed change in uncertain political environments can be emotionally draining; this team’s mission is to keep tabs on morale, offer support, and identify areas for change.

Although there is not a prescribed set of roles each coalition needs, the important thing is to clarify each person’s role and responsibilities. To help members feel comfortable in their roles and prepare them to act quickly when the political environment shifts, coalitions should enable opportunities for members to interact regularly in these smaller groups, as described above.\textsuperscript{134}

**DEVELOP PRACTICES THAT BUILD COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**

Coalitions thrive when they inspire a strong sense of collective identity, or the feeling of belonging to a group that “derives from members’ common interests, experiences and solidarity.”\textsuperscript{135} Collective identity creates a feeling of “we-ness” that stresses “the similarities or shared attributes around which group members coalesce.”\textsuperscript{136} These attachments form boundaries that create an “us” in which individuals organize not around their personal interests (e.g., their social class, their professional status, their race or gender, or even shared grievances) but around their emerging, politicized understanding of who they are as a group.\textsuperscript{137} They begin to construct a shared understanding of themselves, their experiences, and the climate in which they operate.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{132} Pardo and Burke 2006; Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant 2005; Sarkar, Aulakh, and Cavusgil 1998
\textsuperscript{133} Snowden and Rancati 2021 p. 26
\textsuperscript{134} Snowden and Rancati 2021
\textsuperscript{135} Taylor and Whittier 1992 p. 170
\textsuperscript{136} Cerulo 1997 p. 386
\textsuperscript{137} Melucci 1989
\textsuperscript{138} Taylor 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994; Melucci 1989
Importantly, the presence of a collective identity does not deny or suppress difference. Rather, collective identity-building involves the active identification, management, and negotiation of difference.\textsuperscript{139} The deliberate focus, elevation, and discussion of difference (be it based on demographics, experience, strategic preference or other coalition dynamics) speaks to the fact that collective identity is not a permanent, binary variable but a collective understanding that morphs. Scholars stress that building and nurturing collective identities is ongoing work; in healthy coalitions, the shared identity is constantly reconstituted and renegotiated in processes that are iterative and relational.\textsuperscript{140} Data from movements that vary across time, issues, and constituencies all demonstrate that groups must constantly construct — even ritualize — the collective identity process.\textsuperscript{141} Negotiation should not be limited to the moments following defeat or victory; evidence suggests that the space, time, and legitimacy of collective identity practices should be woven into the structure and norms of a group.\textsuperscript{142}

Research finds that beyond an individual’s enhanced sense of belonging, collective identities improve a coalition’s function internally and in the external political realm. At the individual level, collective identity increases participation and solidifies commitment to both the cause and the relationships that undergird the group.\textsuperscript{143} Sharing a collective identity also improves a group’s internal coordination and builds a sense of collective agency.\textsuperscript{144} Again, that is not due to the elimination of differences but the fact that the collective identity empowers the group to work collectively to manage disagreements or schisms.\textsuperscript{145} Finally, in diverse coalitions where constituencies are unlikely to overlap, collective identities can provide inoculation against external strains, which can erode inter-organizational solidarity.\textsuperscript{146}

Many of the core architectural decisions discussed above also foster collective identities. Just as boundaries clarify accountability and responsibility, for example, they also delineate who counts as the “we” and establish a dominant “them” who advocates seek to challenge.\textsuperscript{147} Some additional ways to foster and facilitate collective identity include:

- **Defining the “We”:** Like any political effort or collective activity, coalition work is a process of meaning making. Research on collective identity suggests that a group needs opportunities to work through questions such as “Who are we?” — a space to do the work of constructing and producing an identity that transcends the separate, individual identities that initially brought people to the table.\textsuperscript{148} This reflection should encompass defining the group itself as well as its shared goals and sense of strategic direction (while recognizing that the identity might need to be renegotiated as internal and external strategies shift).

- **Storytelling and Negotiation:** Scholars note that collective identities are “talked into existence.”\textsuperscript{149} Conversations and open sharing of experiences are crucial because they enable group members to redefine and politicize how their individual experience connects to shared efforts. This open dialogue is especially critical in the early stages of group development, as conversations reveal to participants...
potential points of connection. Ongoing discussion then provides a venue for activists to freely discuss the identities that they claim.\textsuperscript{150} Research has identified a sequential process in which a group of people can build collective identity: by 1) articulating a vision; 2) identifying what they are not; 3) comparing individuals’ prior experiences to their experiences with the group; and 4) developing shared understandings of what the group is becoming.\textsuperscript{151}

- **Creating and Celebrating Small Wins:** One practice that can bolster collective identity is to celebrate small wins.\textsuperscript{152} Even when successes appear relatively small, participating in collective tasks builds a sense of belonging.\textsuperscript{153} Small wins — even those limited to internal goals or processes — increase trust, commitment, and shared understanding.\textsuperscript{154} When individuals feel connected to the group, its success breeds personal pride and positive self-esteem, which drive further investment in the shared work.\textsuperscript{155}

- **Recognizing the Emotional Component of Collective Action:** Studies show that even for individuals with high levels of commitment, a hostile movement experience will deter future participation. Positive group experiences, on the other hand, keep people engaged in the face of strategic loss.\textsuperscript{156} Architectural decisions must be attentive to the affective experiences of their members. That includes sharing emotional responses, even negative ones: “The experience of fear and anxiety, not uncommon in the midst of protest, can be a strong force in creating a sense of collectivity and be an attractive force in collective actions.”\textsuperscript{157} The same, of course, can be said for a mood of energy and agency, which “feed collective efforts.”\textsuperscript{158}

- **Participation in Political Activity:** The literature finds that “visible moments of movement activity, such as protests, can impact, foster and strengthen a collective identity.”\textsuperscript{159} External events create opportunities for a group to assert its identity to the public and for participants to connect their involvement to the “we” they construct together.\textsuperscript{160}

**Key questions to ask yourself about your coalition:**

- Does your coalition have clear boundaries?
- Is your coalition organically embedded in the community?
- Does your coalition provide opportunities to interact regularly?
- Does your coalition have clear roles?
- Does your coalition break larger groups into smaller, mission-focused groups to promote trust and agency?
- Does your coalition have processes for shared visioning and celebrating wins to build a sense of belonging and collective identity?

\textsuperscript{150} Lichterman 1999
\textsuperscript{151} Gioia et al. 2010
\textsuperscript{152} Ungureanu et al. 2020; Vangen and Huxham 2003; Ansell and Gash 2008; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; J. A. Bryson 1988
\textsuperscript{153} Ungureanu et al. 2020; Vangen and Huxham 2003; J. A. Bryson 1988
\textsuperscript{154} Ansell and Gash 2008
\textsuperscript{155} Tajfel and Turner 1979; 1986; Melucci 1989
\textsuperscript{156} Fominaya 2010
\textsuperscript{157} Eyerman 2005 p. 43
\textsuperscript{158} Jasper 2011 p. 297
\textsuperscript{159} Gawerc 2016 p. 195
\textsuperscript{160} Polletta and Jasper 2001
Coalition Stressors

Strong coalition architecture that promotes buy-in, commitment, trust, and a sense of agency helps create resilient and effective coalitions. Yet even for the most well-designed coalitions, stress is inevitable. Points of tension to look out for include the following:

• **External events that threaten the group's collective identity or amplify differences**: Coalitions experience tension when events cause identities within the coalition to conflict with each other. One example of such friction is South Central Los Angeles’ Black-Korean Alliance, which collapsed in 1991 after a Korean American grocer shot a 15-year-old Black girl. Following the shooting, already tense relations between the local Black and Korean American communities deteriorated rapidly. Within the Black-Korean Alliance, members of each community feared that they would be ostracized by their respective communities if they continued their alliance with the other.\(^{161}\) Notably, internal power dynamics, a lack of resources, and cross-cultural dynamics had weakened the alliance prior to the shooting,\(^{162}\) making the coalition vulnerable to the intense external pressures that materialized.

• **Competition among organizations for resources**: Financial resources and funders’ decisions about support frequently create points of tension within coalitions. Scarcity of money, activists, and other valued resources can cause inter-organizational conflict,\(^{163}\) as can funding decisions such as grant requirements or the unequal distribution of funds. Some research suggests that funders commit to longer-term, less restrictive funding to give coalition members greater flexibility and security.\(^{164}\)

• **Achieving success**: Perhaps counterintuitively, success can strain coalitions. This occurs for two main reasons. First, when opportunities emerge to push through some of a coalition’s goals, divergent priorities can erode solidarity. During this time, political targets, such as legislators, can break off part of the coalition by agreeing to the demands of some members at the expense of others.\(^{165}\) As sociologist Amanda Buday writes, “[o]ne irony of successful social movements is that, as the polity responds to the movement by incorporating some of its demands, factions emerge between groups who are willing to accept incremental improvements and groups who insist on sweeping changes.”\(^{166}\) Second, a more favorable political environment can reduce momentum by bringing activists’ identities into conflict. For example, activists’ longstanding opposition to a set of polices may come into conflict with a desire to support a new, more politically-aligned administration. Thus, the coalition may reduce its efforts just when political conditions seem ripe for success.\(^{167}\)

Assessing Effectiveness

Evaluating coalitions is extremely complex. The scholarly literature does not provide a clear method for assessing effectiveness—in part because coalitions have such a wide array of goals. Nonetheless, we’re

---

161 Diaz-Veizades and Chang 1996
162 Diaz-Veizades and Chang 1996
163 Staggenborg 1986
164 Rayner and Bonnici 2021; Reinicke et al. 2000
165 Krinsky and Reese 2006
166 Buday 2019 p. 80; Meyer 2015
167 Heaney and Rojas 2015
hopeful that focusing on the coalition architecture that we propose here offers a pathway to thinking about evaluation beyond campaign outputs or scale of actions taken.

One way to assess coalitions is to examine the extent to which they have an architecture that sets them up for success. Do coalitions have clarity about decision-making, processes for learning, and practices for building trusting relationships? How democratic is their decision-making process? Do real-time, embedded learning practices increase the coalition’s flexibility and strategic capacity? Are boundaries and social roles clear, and has the coalition maximized opportunities to build trust?

Evaluation can also focus on what the coalition achieves. Rayner and Bonnici, who have worked with many coalition efforts over time, argue that there are (at least) two types of value that a coalition can measure to assess efficacy: visible value and invisible value. Visible value refers to concrete actions and achievements. These include easily measurable metrics like the number of voters the coalition registered, the number of volunteers they recruited to make phone calls or sign a petition, whether the coalition persuaded a legislator to vote a certain way on a bill, or whether a target piece of legislation was passed. Invisible value is more challenging to measure but may be equally (if not more) important in assessing a coalition’s ability to build power and gain wins. Invisible value includes metrics like the quality of relationships, coalition members’ experiences, and the experiences of the community within which the coalition operates. Invisible value is often a good measure of resilience and can help indicate whether a coalition will stay together to ensure lasting change.

Rayner and Bonnici argue, “In systems that exhibit complexity and depth, invisible value is most evident at the deepest level of scale, at the ‘grassroots.’” Primary actors are the “most immersed in the system that is changing,” and measurement and learning should start with them, as the “designers, participants, data collectors, and evaluators themselves.” Coalition members should hold themselves accountable to what primary actors identify as valuable and measure that. At the same time, they need to demonstrate to funders why it is valuable and provide metrics to demonstrate the level to which they have built that value.

**Recommendations for Philanthropy**

While there are no quick or one-size-fits-all solutions for funding successful coalitions, this synthesis of existing research points to a set of key practices for philanthropists to consider when supporting the development of resilient and effective coalitions:

- **Avoid top-down approaches** to building coalitions. Funders seeking to support coalitions often use money to incentive partnerships they deem important. Such strategies often backfire because they shift accountability away from the community and toward the funder. Funders should instead recognize that coalition success often depends on the presence of affective orientations like buy-in, commitment, trust, and agency that are difficult to purchase or generate from the top-down. Instead, funders should focus on helping generate those resources from the bottom-up by doing things such as:

168 Rayner and Bonnici 2021
169 Rayner and Bonnici 2021
170 Rayner and Bonnici 2021 p. 132
171 Rayner and Bonnici 2021 p. 128
172 Rayner and Bonnici 2021
» Draw on organic leaders and networks in a community, including groups that are directly impacted by the problem;¹⁷³
» Allow organic leaders to identify the boundaries of the coalition;
» Incentivize investments in good coalition architecture among organic leaders;
» Hold coalitions accountable for both the visible and invisible value they create.

- **Use the “Key Questions” embedded throughout this report** to assess the strength of existing coalitions, and prompt learning conversations with partners about strengthening coalitions.

- **Commit to larger, less-restricted, long-term grants** that enable coalitions to invest in architecture and to create both visible and invisible value.¹⁷⁴ A stable funding base and a longer time-horizon will encourage the development of important capacities and architecture beyond short-term campaign tactics. Simultaneously, it can facilitate trusting relationships by reducing feelings of scarcity related to funding and competition among organizations within the coalition.¹⁷⁵

- **Support coalition leaders in developing the technical capacities they need to invest in good architecture.** This can include, for instance, data infrastructure that supports learning feedback loops or trainings about different governance models.

- **Create spaces** where current and potential coalition leaders can invest in relationship-building, collectively develop structures and practices, and identify campaign goals and strategies. If funders participate in decision-making, it should be at a level equal to others.¹⁷⁶

- Include measures of success in your reporting requirements that (1) go beyond campaign outcomes or a scale of actions, (2) assess coalition architecture instead of just outcomes, and (3) include both the visible and invisible value that coalitions create. For example, foundations could ask coalitions about their architecture and how it supports democratic governance, real-time learning, clarity of roles, or trusting relationships.

## Conclusion

Coalitions are most effective when they intentionally make design choices that build intangible resources of buy-in, commitment, trust, and a sense of individual and collective agency among their members. When stakeholders are invested in the coalition, the mission, and the community in which they operate, as well as one another, they can withstand the inevitable stressors and messiness of collective action. Yet because these resources are intangible, setting up the structures to foster them demands intentionality and vigilance. **We argue that coalition architecture that promotes democratized governance, real-time learning and flexibility, and clear roles and trusting relationships is more resilient and, ultimately, effective.** We’ve attempted to isolate the decision points around governance, learning, and roles and relationships that bolster the factors linked to coalition success.

¹⁷³ Rayner and Bonnici 2021
¹⁷⁴ Rayner and Bonnici 2021
¹⁷⁵ Staggenborg 1986
¹⁷⁶ Tattersall 2020
These methods do not guarantee success. Collective action is challenging. People are tempted to free ride. Reconciling power inequalities and conflicting theories of change can pose problems. Collaboration in the uncertain, rapidly changing political environment makes strategizing, let alone winning, difficult. But when coalition builders make design choices that encourage buy-in, commitment, trust, and agency among coalition members, the coalition’s ability to realize its goals becomes more probable.

Finally, thoughtful coalition design delivers benefits beyond the current campaign or coalition. It leaves behind a footprint of structures, practices, and relationships that persist long after the coalition disbands, creating the conditions for effective future collective action. Future actors can draw on this rich, pre-existing groundwork to efficiently create new coalitions organically embedded in the communities they represent. Thus, the time and effort that coalition members invest in well-functioning, community-rooted coalitions can be worthwhile, even when coalitions fail to achieve their primary objectives. Good coalition architecture produces a renewable resource—the ability to act collectively and build political power—that can be drawn from again and again.

177 Staggenborg and Lecomte 2009
Appendix A: Research Methodology

Our approach involved searches across multiple disciplines. First, we conducted a thorough review of coalitions literature in sociology and political science, with a particular focus on social movement organizations. That review identified 64 books and articles on coalitions. Second, we engaged expert informants to help us identify any relevant research we might have overlooked. They identified four additional books and four more articles across political science, economics, business and management, and public health. Third, we used “coalition” and “multi-stakeholder partnership” as search terms to query an academic database, Web of Science. The term “coalition” returned 33,376 results, including 17,458 published in the last ten years. The term “multi-stakeholder partnership” returned 502 results, including 406 results published in the last ten years.

For the next phase, we generated a Web of Science visualization to locate relevant bodies of research outside our fields of expertise. That required that we export the citation information from the returned articles into a tab-delimited data file. To make the “coalition” search more manageable we exported the 4,000 publications Web of Science’s algorithm identified as most relevant. We then imported that data into VosViewer, a software tool used to construct and visualize bibliometric networks. VosViewer enabled us to map the citations that Web of Science returned.

The maps plot the “association strength” between papers. Association strength is a measure of the co-occurrence of frequencies of citations, or how often citations appear together in the articles that we analyzed. Distance between the notes indicates the association strength between citations. The closer two citations are on the map, the stronger their association strength. Size of a node indicates number of times that a given article is cited across all papers.

We first mapped results from the “coalition” search. We included only publications with 10 or more citations. This reduced the number of publications from 4,000 to 1,084 and allowed us to focus on the most influential works. To narrow our search further, we restricted the map to interconnected publications, meaning publications that were linked to each other through citations (e.g., they cited or were cited by the same papers). This produced a “coalition” map with 759 interconnected publications. We repeated the same process using the “multi-stakeholder partnership” search term but used one citation as our threshold for inclusion rather than ten, because this search term returned far fewer results. The one-citation threshold reduced the number of included publications from 502 to 399. Further restricting our sample to interconnected publications produced a “stakeholder” map of 92 interconnected publications.

The citation maps helped us to identify additional articles in the fields that we had already begun to explore. They also pointed us to other fields that study effective coalition building, such as management studies, community health, and community psychology.

After identifying relevant publications through the literature review, expert informants, and citation maps, we tracked the citations in these works to identify additional relevant publications. Finally, as new themes emerged from our review, such as democratic decision-making and collective identity, we searched those terms in academic databases. In total, this report cites over 130 books and articles that we felt captured the core concepts related to coalition architecture. All told, we drew from the fields of political science, economics, sociology, business and management, community health, and social psychology. That so many disciplines study coalitions confirms our major motivation for this review: coalitions touch multiple facets of the social world.
References


Grossman, Zoltan. 2001. “‘Let’s Not Create Evilness for This River’: Interethnic Environmental Alliances of Native Americans and Rural Whites in Northern Wisconsin.” In Forging Radical Alliances Across Difference.


