



**Public Welfare
Foundation**



Factors that Support Coalition Formation

MAY 2025

Introduction

In some places, coalitions abound, with many nonprofits, government agencies, affected communities, and system leaders coming together to address complex problems that need to be informed and addressed by many perspectives and approaches. In other places, coalitions can have trouble taking root and flourishing. We wanted to better understand what factors play into coalition formation and how they might be leveraged, addressed, or ameliorated in pursuit of stronger, effective coalitions.

To help Public Welfare Foundation explore advocacy coalitions that transform criminal justice, ORS Impact (ORS) has conducted two literature scans. While the second literature scan identifies conditions that enable coalition success, this first scan identifies factors that lead to successful coalition formation. This research review provides insight into the various social, institutional, and organizational features that enable or restrict advocacy coalitions during building and development. Although our research did not uncover differences in coalition formation across US regions, through this scan, **we have identified six variables that contribute to the formation of coalitions: external shocks and catalysts, resource availability, existing networks and social ties, key actors, ideological alignment and belief systems, and political will and systems.**

The six key variables that influence coalition formation can be grouped into three broader categories of understanding:

- » **Interpersonal relationships:** ideological alignment and belief systems, existing networks and social ties
- » **Institutional conditions:** resource availability, key actors
- » **External contexts:** external shocks and catalysts, political will and systems

This literature scan explores how, and in what contexts, these features enable or restrict advocacy coalition development.

ORS Observations

This literature scan illuminates a variety of factors that contribute to advocacy coalition formation. Because it relates to the work of Public Welfare Foundation and its partners, it is important to highlight that coalition formation is a highly contextual process. No prescriptive or formulaic aggregation of the key factors will inevitably lead to coalition development or success, nor does a coalition need all these factors to develop. Rather, this literature scan identifies how these variables may contribute to, or inhibit, the formation of successful advocacy coalitions, recognizing that the relative importance of each factor may differ across contexts and circumstances. This research highlights an array of elements that coalitions should consider during development, and it showcases how those elements may affect coalition formation.

Interpersonal Relationships

Ideological Alignment and Belief Systems

Coalition members typically share similar ideologies and mobilize to unite against those with antagonistic beliefs.

They usually hold the same normative policy beliefs but may differ in their empirical policy beliefs. This means that coalition actors likely share the same value-based beliefs about a particular issue area but do not necessarily align on the strategies or tools needed to address it. Shared beliefs about policy instruments—the mechanisms used to implement policies—do not result in coalition formation, as actors often have conflicting reasons to oppose or support a given policy tool (Malkamäki et al., 2021). The perception of shared beliefs among members is also critical in coalition formation, as members often seek out those who they believe share their views (Matti & Sandström, 2013). Findings showed that coalition members were more likely to align with and offer better terms to people who shared their ideological beliefs, demonstrating the importance of social identity in coalition development (Laroze et al., 2020).

The importance of shared beliefs in coalition formation, however, is not uniform across coalition type and may depend on the coalition's structure. For instance, coalitions formed with loose affiliations may not need the same level of ideological congruence. In contrast, high-touch coalitions that operate with frequent member interactions may depend more on ideological alignment (Amos & Van Dyke, 2017).

The importance of ideological attraction is clarified when there is a common opponent. Literature found that policy coalitions often formed in opposition to an ideological antagonist. The effects of “belief homophily,” or shared beliefs that bring collaborators together, were driven by an avoidance to their ideological counter rather than a pure attraction to those who share their beliefs (Henry et al., 2011). In exploring coalition development in politically divided communities, research demonstrated that these deep divisions resulted in only one political side participating in the coalition, especially in its early stages. Moreover, beliefs in privacy, independence, or individualism prevented some groups from joining coalition efforts (Kegler et al., 2010).

Existing Networks and Social Ties

Social ties between organizations and their existing networks directly contribute to the formation of advocacy coalitions and influence how coalitions operate.

The literature highlights that mobilizing structures, or the existing networks and organizations within a given policy system, help coalitions develop and endure. When analyzing this relationship in the context of substance use–related harm reduction policies in Sweden, researchers found that the existing networks and institutions in the health sector provided advocates with the setting, resources, and leadership needed to pursue collective action (Kübler, 2001).

Literature also found that organizations focused on multiple issues facilitated coalition building across movements. Because of their expansive focus, these organizations could connect groups across issues, advancing coalition work within and between movements. They also contributed to increased mobilization for these coalitions (Van Dyke, 2003).

The institutional memory of existing networks deeply informs the structure of the coalition that emerges from them—in formal and informal ways. A coalition's structure, membership, and decisions on who or what organization leads it reflect, to some degree, past collaborations. Without a specific focus on forging new relationships or developing new working styles, subsequent collaborations carry many of the same elements of previous formations (Kegler et al., 2010).

Potential Considerations and Takeaways:

- » To what degree is there a shared opponent or shared set of beliefs upon which groups can develop a shared vision or goal, a key component of successful coalitions?
- » What is the current nonprofit landscape across geographies? What organizations currently exist, and what relationships exist between them? If coalitions have failed in the past, how can groups not fall into the same traps or problems as before?

Landscape Conditions

Resource Availability

Access to financial, political, and social resources provides a foundation for coalition development and incentivizes organizations to collaborate. Resource availability is critical to coalition development and sustainability (Van Dyke, 2003; Amos & Van Dyke, 2017; Kegler et al., 2010). Literature exploring why groups join coalitions found that members wanted to collaborate if it gave them access to money, information, or political contacts (Mahoney, 2007; Hula, 1999). Because resource availability is a formative condition for coalition building, advocates backed by medium and large organizations are more likely to join coalitions. When resources are scarce, coalitions help organizations pool limited resources, allowing them to collectively do more with less (Mahoney, 2007). In helping organizations share resources, coalitions can also mitigate competition between organizations that are typically vying for the same resource pool (Van Dyke, 2003; Amos & Van Dyke, 2017; Staggenborg, 1986).

Resources also affect coalition sustainability. When resources flow into the policy area, the coalitions surrounding that issue are better able to persist. This uptick in resource allocation may directly result from an initial success in advancing a policy agenda (e.g., the government adopting the suggested policy platform as its goal). In contrast, when resources are depleted, it is more difficult for collective mobilization efforts to endure. These resources include investments in inputs like research and evaluation, as well as resources that enhance the coalition's network and access to power, like additional government positions or new jobs in the policy area (Kübler, 2001).

Ultimately, for groups to decide to join the coalition, the participation costs—the potential loss of autonomous decision making, the need to compromise, the subversion of organizational identity, and the possibility of ideological conflicts—should be outweighed by the tangible and intangible resource benefits (Corrigall-Brown & Meyer, 2010; Mahoney, 2007; Hojnacki, 1997). However, these cost-benefit analyses are also influenced by a group or individual's tie to the coalition participants, as referenced in the section on interpersonal relationships. For instance, groups are more likely to participate in a coalition if coalition members have fostered trust through past collaborations (Corrigall-Brown & Meyer, 2010).

Individual and geographic barriers can affect coalition participation. Research showed that people who worked long hours or juggled multiple jobs were unable to participate in coalitions. Young people who lacked access to transportation or were experiencing major life transitions, like moving from high school to college, faced barriers to participation. The literature also highlights that a community's geography can influence participation. Large distances in rural communities or the presence of gated communities in urban areas serve as barriers for developing coalitions with “broad geographic representation.” Because rural areas have smaller populations, there are also fewer people who can fill the staff roles needed to develop and sustain a coalition, leading to a heavier reliance on volunteer time (Kegler et al., 2010).

Key Actors

People who can serve as connectors, facilitators, and policy entrepreneurs play key roles in coalition development. Existing social ties are often driven by individuals whose networks bring organizations together, enabling coalition development. These connectors are referred to as “bridge builders” or “coalition brokers” because they are connected to multiple organizations. In analyzing the Win Without War coalition that organized against the US war on Iraq, one study found that the organizational and social network map of five key individuals explained which organizations participated (Corrigall-Brown & Meyer, 2010; Amos & Van Dyke, 2017). Actors can build trust with those they have not yet worked with through these coalition brokers, who cosign or “vouch” for the related parties. In this way, they create a “chain of trust that is transitive ... if X trusts Y and Y trusts Z, then X will also trust Z” (Henry et al., 2011). These coalition brokers may also leverage their political power to advance

collaboration in pursuit of policy objectives. Network members who regularly play this role are very successful in forming links between contacts. Research found that actors such as regional authorities, state and federal agencies, and local governments are key coalition brokers (Henry et al., 2011).

In addition to brokers, coalition development also relies on the presence of “skilled facilitators and mediators.” These key actors, who maintain neutrality, grow the coalition by fostering central coordination, which allows the coalition to maintain its structure, build alliances among parties, and keep itself stable (Sanfilippo, 2015; Henry, 2011; Sabatier & Weible, 2007).

Policy entrepreneurs are another set of key actors that, in some ways, combine the roles of coalition broker and facilitator. These actors are individuals or organizations that collaborate with others in a policy subsystem to advance an objective through their networks, resources, strategic thinking, and negotiation skills to “disrupt status quo policy arrangements” and introduce new innovations (Mintrom, 2019). They maintain and defend a policy position, creating processes for sharing information and beliefs, coordinating actions, and developing a recognized specialization in the policy area. The presence of policy entrepreneurs is positively correlated with the formation of advocacy coalitions (Rodrigues et al., 2020).

Potential Considerations and Takeaways:

- » What resources (e.g., financial, social capital, political access) can coalitions offer members, regardless of distribution mechanisms?
- » To what degree can coalitions minimize participation barriers to engage a sufficient number and diversity of members, especially around geography-specific barriers?
- » Does the potential coalition membership include individuals who can cover these three key roles (connector, facilitator, and policy entrepreneur)? How can the group support, build, and incentivize these roles?

External Conditions

External Shocks and Catalysts

By disrupting the status quo and opening up new possibilities, external shocks and catalysts play a crucial role in the formation and development of advocacy coalitions.

These events can create opportunities for new coalitions to develop by disrupting an existing policy subsystem and prompting public attention to that issue area. For instance, after a shift in the Nigerian government ended a crucial program funding support for maternal health outcomes, maternal and child mortality rates increased. This led to a sense of urgency to

take action, triggering the creation of maternal and child health coalitions. The motivation to take collective action was also driven by reports that Nigeria had the third-highest maternal death rate in the world. As cited by the researchers, one coalition member reflected on how these cuts and their results led to coalition building, stating, *“Immediately the government stopped funding that SURE-P programme, many people reacted and that was the beginning of increased death of mothers and children, so we had to act fast”* (Okeke et al., 2021).

Though literature often emphasized leveraging political opportunities or policy windows to advance timely policy goals, research also showed that antagonistic political actors in the policy subsystem can lead to threats that motivate coalition formation and collaboration (Van Dyke, 2003; Amos & Van Dyke, 2017). For example, when exploring the conditions that instigate American college students to protest and build coalitions, the literature demonstrated that negative responses from counterdemonstrators and university administration led campus groups to develop intramovement coalitions in response. The more power a perceived enemy wields, the greater the opportunity for coalition building across movements. For instance, when the Ronald Reagan administration threatened Black and LGBTQ communities, different interest groups combined forces and engaged in cross-movement coalition work. This demonstrates that while smaller antagonists, like a university administration, lead to within-movement coalition work, more powerful antagonists can facilitate cross-movement coalitions (Van Dyke, 2003).

External threats can also encourage groups with a history of disagreement to band together around a particular crisis. When pro-life movements pushed to close abortion clinics in Cleveland, National Organization for Women chapters that had split due to class conflicts came together alongside other organizations to fight back (Reger, 2002; Amos & Van Dyke, 2017). In addition, when there are threats (or, in contrast, when there is momentum toward success), movements are more likely to receive the financial support that enables their work because their supporters have an added motivation to donate (Amos & Van Dyke, 2017; Staggenborg, 1986).

Although external threats may motivate coalition building, both within and across movements, those catalysts do not automatically result in success throughout the policy process. Research on coalition work after an environmental disaster found that though the minority coalition was able to exploit a flood event to advance a policy change, the implementation was weak and undermined the group’s ultimate impact (Wiley et al., 2020; Albright, 2011).

Political Will and Political Systems

Coalitions are more likely to form in political systems that operate through direct elections. Evidence has found that coalitions are more likely to form in places where the public can hold policymakers accountable through elections. In these cases, policymakers must ensure that a large segment of voters supports their votes on policy proposals. This incentivizes groups to form coalitions to demonstrate the popularity of a given policy proposal (Mahoney, 2007). Political will for a given policy idea can also create an opportunity for success that encourages coalition development. One study found that, in the 1960s, the presence of social movements globally brought international partners into coalition with civil rights organizations in Northern Ireland to help advance their cause (Amos & Van Dyke, 2017).

Potential Considerations and Takeaways:

- » Has there been a new antagonist or local shock that may mobilize people into new formations? Could these formations be supported? Can they be attached to existing groups?

Discussion

Though the literature does not address these conditions in relation to criminal justice transformation coalitions, much of the research can be applied to this issue area. As coalitions engage in learning-oriented reflection, it may help to consider if, and to what extent, these six variables are present. For example, ideological beliefs about criminal justice may diverge more in particular geographies, especially given the growing popularity of more expansive visions of public safety while “tough on crime” narratives continue to be a strong force against change. In the past, discourse was more heavily concentrated on smaller system reforms, but now a growing number of advocates invest in broader transformation efforts, like the abolition of all prisons and jails. This ideological divergence could make it more difficult for organizations to unify around shared goals while developing coalitions with diverse membership. In other cases, geographies with strong criminal justice transformation advocacy coalitions may have access to more financial resources or be situated within more accommodating political structures. Further, with the recent and ongoing changes to the United States’ political, social, and economic landscape, catalytic events may play an even more immediate and present role in enabling coalition formation. As new coalitions emerge, it will be useful to continue to think about how these variables relate to coalition formation.

Conclusion

Taken together, the literature demonstrates several factors that contribute to coalition formation. From the catalytic power of external events to the presence of shared beliefs and existing networks, coalitions are formed and developed based, in part, on numerous inputs and conditions. The applicability of each of these factors on coalition formation depends on the coalition's purpose, structure, and environment. This demonstrates that these variables are not always preconditions for coalition success and suggests that they should be considered with nuance when exploring coalition development.

Methods

To gather this information, we searched for literature that addressed advocacy coalition formation, rather than coalition success or coalition structures. We used AI-powered tools including Perplexity, Consensus, and ChatGPT to find articles that explored the question: What are the factors that enable or restrict the formation of advocacy coalitions? We uploaded the resulting articles into Genei, a literature review tool, to organize and summarize each article, and we reviewed each article to verify Genei's synthesis. We then reviewed those summaries to see if the articles' contents contributed to the research question. Once we verified that an article was relevant to our search, we explored its literature base and key conclusions and organized our findings into the six variable categories. After organizing all the information from our base of articles, we synthesized the key takeaways in narrative form, as reflected in this report.

Recommended Citation

» Burnett, J., & Stachowiak, S. (2025, May 30). Factors that Support Coalition Formation. Public Welfare Foundation.

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