



2120 L STREET, NW
SIXTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20037
phone: 202.223.9541
fax: 202.223.9579

Building Coalitions to Define and Win Issue Campaigns

Peter Loge
Senior Vice President
[M+R Strategic Services](#)
ploge@mrсс.com

Why a coalition? Before forming a coalition it makes sense to answer the question why one would gather a coalition to begin with.

There are a lot of reasons to form a coalition, including:

- Bring like-minded groups together to pool resources (time, money, talent) to advance a broad social agenda – USAction which is Citizen Action affiliates, labor groups, and other liberal groups working on liberal issues;
- Bring like-minded groups together to pool resources to advance a specific issue or idea – The Gideon Desk, No Exceptions campaign to promote the need to improve indigent defense;
- Bring groups with a shared goal together to advance a specific issue or piece of legislation – The Justice Project’s Campaign for Criminal Justice Reform’s coalition to advance the Innocence Protection Act;
- Bring groups and people together to promote shared internal and external professional and policy goals – National Legal Aide and Defender Association, which includes American Council of Chief Defenders and others;

If you choose to form a coalition, it should be in the service of a campaign, not the reverse. Before bringing a coalition together, you need to know what you want to accomplish and how you want to accomplish it. You should know what role the coalition will play – do you need to motivate typical or predictable allies and demonstrate unity (all the civil rights groups)? Do you need to demonstrate all sides of a debate agree (defense attorneys and prosecutors)? Do you need to show diverse support for an issue (budget hawks and environmentalists)? What else needs to be done in the campaign, and is a coalition the best way to accomplish it?

In addition, you need a campaign infrastructure that can use and manage the coalition. If you start the coalition before the campaign is ready for it, you run the risk of the coalition taking over the campaign, coalition partners defecting (or turning against you), or making the campaign’s mission the maintenance of the coalition rather than the coalition supporting the end goal of the campaign.

Coalitions can serve both strategic and tactical purposes.

Strategically, coalitions help define an issue internally and externally, which in turn determines the range of possible results of the coalition’s work.

A coalition's composition will help determine how the members of the coalition act towards each other, the goals they choose, and the actions they take. A coalition of conservative social groups will tend to reinforce their own core beliefs and charge off to the right – this may be good, if the coalition leader wants to energize the base, show how many social conservatives there are out there, etc. But it would be a disaster if the goal was to demonstrate that social conservatives were fairly mainstream folks, because no one around the table will articulate a moderate or liberal message. If you're at a soccer game surrounded by screaming fans, you scream. If you're at a play, you rarely scream because those around you aren't screaming. Same logic.

And, of course, a coalition defines an issue to the outside world. Defining issues is the key to winning policy debates. If you can establish what the debate is about, you win it. In many ways, the real political battle is the definitional one; whomever controls the subject, or focus, of an issue controls the outcome. If the issue is farming, and the coalition is all labor groups, the issue is about migrant workers rights, OSHA standards, and other laws that effect farm workers – the coalition could say they are about the environment, but the coalition's composition will make that claim hard to sell. If the coalition wants to demonstrate wide support for an issue, it must include those associated with all sides of that issue, not just one side claiming it's open and broad.

Tactically is how we tend to think of coalitions. They can bring together resources, ideas and activists. They help focus press, public and legislative attention. And they help make an issue credible. It is important to think strategically before you think tactically. Don't form a coalition because that's what one does, getting everyone to a table and then seeing what happens. Think about what you want to achieve, who you need to achieve it, and how you will achieve it – then think about how coalitions may, or may not, be able to help you accomplish your goals.

Then think about how to deploy the coalition – do they issue statements as a unit (i.e, the Green Scissors project), or as separate groups who support a specific end (lots of different groups endorsing the Innocence Protection Act)? Do they hold press conferences, meetings, briefings, etc? Or do they just raise money?

A coalition (or coalitions – there's no reason you can't have a lot of coalitions working on the same project; candidate campaigns do this all the time, "sportsmen for X", "another Democrat for Y" and so on) is a tool. Before forming a coalition, make sure it's the right tool for the job, and then use it correctly.

I. General Approach

or

The easiest way to get people who disagree with you to work with you is to agree with them.

First, who are you? Not an easy question to answer. If you are going to be a “third way” group, building bridges, making friends, bonding, carving new ground, fighting in the mighty middle, forging new paths, etc., etc. then you really have to do that. You can’t nudge and wink, hoping your new allies don’t notice that the emperor is wearing only Birkenstocks. You really must be this new thing, you cannot be a front group or shell. If you begin to have some success you cannot suddenly lurch back to your original direction. To be a credible, continuing third way group, you must be that. Given that you are committing to this third way, you should spend time figuring out what that means. If you try to move from your original purpose, your new allies will notice very quickly, as will the press and those whom you are trying to persuade; you will anger all of them, which will work against your goals and make it harder to build coalitions in the future.

In short, pick it and stick it.

Second, who are those? In a traditional coalition of allies, the answer is mostly found at your office parties. In building third way coalitions, the answer is generally found among those who you would never, ever invite to your office parties. Instead of rounding up the usuals, round up the un-unusual suspects. For a new gun group with traditional anti-gun folks (Handgun Control Inc.) that means pro-gun lobbyists. You may have to shade back a bit, find folks more to the center, but you may as well aim for the extreme. It also means groups with whom you might not otherwise work, non-traditional stakeholders, or others who have to be persuaded to join the political fray – get PTAs, toy stores or video-game manufacturers involved in the gun violence debate.

The best way to find and contact these folks is to brainstorm – make a list of your enemies, make a list of people who might care (guns kill kids, so kids care – call kids), go through your PDA and call friends who might care, call famous people, etc. Be creative and aggressive – approach it as you would fundraising.

Third, on what do you agree? The tricky part.

First, a review of what does not persuade people: vim, vitriol, volume, viciousness, vice, vapidness, vaticness and viscosity. Righteous indignation may get you to heaven, but it never passed a bill.

Talking LOUDER and s-l-o-w-e-r isn’t persuasive. Telling a smoker to quit because it’s bad for him rarely results in someone expressing shock and dismay and then quitting.

Second, rather than focus on arguments which look true from the outside, those building coalitions need to look at arguments which look true from the inside. Persuasion relies on the persuaded. That being the case, find something with which the other person agrees. If they think the Second Amendment means guns can never be taken away, then don’t try to convince them otherwise – you will fail. You may be right, but you will fail. What does the person with whom you want to work believe to be true? Do they value personal responsibility? Then talk about personal responsibility as it relates to guns.

Different reasons persuade different people in different contexts. An elected official uses one set of criteria for making decisions about bills in the legislature, and another set for bills at home. When I argue at a bar over a bad call in a soccer game I am using a different set of criteria than I would be if I were officiating the game, didn't favor one team over the other, or were the player who got called for the infraction. Different arguments make sense to different people in different contexts.

Third, agreement is not compromise. In a compromise, you agree to disagree less than usual because each gives and gets a little -- we take away the little guns and they keep the big ones is a compromise.

In agreement, you find a whole new thing to do on which you both agree. One thinks guns are good the other thinks they are bad – ok, don't talk about guns. You both agree that the laws relating to guns – heck all laws – ought to be enforced; talk about the importance of law enforcement when it comes to guns.

The hard part, of course, is finding this new area – this new rhetorical space in which you can discuss the issue. There is no way to identify the new ground, just as there is no one way to invent or write anything. There are, however, steps to take that may help.

- First, read about how other people think about your issue, not just what they think about it. Read communications and social science journals that discuss your issue, find rhetorical and linguistic analyses of prior campaigns on the issue. For example, there has been quite a bit written about the movement around abortion – how public opinion changed, how legislators have been persuaded and how the press covers the issue. Learning *how* people think about a topic can tell you more than *what* they think about a topic.
- Second, having learned how others think about your issue, reflect on how you think about your issue. What has persuaded you to take on this cause as opposed to another? Why this take this side? And why bother coalition-building? Write down your core reasons, and locate themes that move you to action (are you driven by people having access to justice? The belief that for man in a state of nature life is nasty, brutish, ugly and short? Or do you think that people are better off with no leader than with a bad one? That sort of thing).
- Third, write your goal – not the goal of the new coalition, but your goal: “ban handguns” for example, or “abolish the death penalty.” Now cross it out. You can't talk about that. Next, write your reasons – “kids are accidentally killed by guns” “guns help foster a climate of violence” “guns are way too heavy.” In this list you are likely to find a core value or motivation that overlaps with your traditional enemies, or those not traditionally involved in the debate.

By bringing in gun supporters and gun opponents you keep the debate about guns and gun control. You may win it, by showing a new way to work the issue, by forging common ground, and all that – but you keep it about the same thing. You can also imagine other groups encouraging gun control separately. For example, parent-teacher groups may support gun control because they don't like the perception (to say nothing of

the reality) that schools are dangerous. Toy makers may like gun control, because without it, toys get lumped in with real guns – it's illegal to take Transformers toys on airplanes for this reason. Pediatricians have already entered the fray because it's a public health issue. All these voices expand the debate, so it is about gun control, *and* school safety, *and* commerce, and so forth.

In working with non-traditional coalitions, a key to agreement is mutually agreed upon arrogance. You have to let every one in the group believe they are morally superior – you will never convince them otherwise, and the point of the coalition is to address a specific problem, not determine who gets to heaven fastest. Gun control advocates believe that enforcing gun laws will not solve the gun violence problem, and anti-gun control advocates believe they will. Each thinks the other side are misguided ideologues. Such beliefs are vital for the coalition to succeed; don't argue with those premises, focus on the area of agreement. Work out who gets to say "I told you so" when you've won.

The Concord Coalition, a budget watch dog group given much of the credit for the political popularity of a balanced federal budget succeeded for this reason. To the traditional political left which believes in federal programs, Concord pointed out that budget deficits led to higher interest payments on the federal debt, which cut into the amount of money available to spend on the environment, health care etc. To the traditional right, Concord said that taxes could not be cut until current obligations were met, that money could not be given back until the money was there to begin with. Both sides agreed on the importance of balanced budgets, neither questioned the others premise (government spending is good/taxes are bad), and our federal budget is balanced.

II. The Specifics or OK, now what?

Having decided this is something you want to do, how do you do it?

First, decide who you are. Name yourselves – something with a center, friendly or right sound to it (Americans for Gun Safety is good – Citizens Against Guns is bad). This will give those whom you approach a sense of who you are, as well as reminding you who you are.

Before choosing a name, find out if it's taken on the web yet – you will want a name that people can find at www.YourName.org, and then register all the suffixes, .com, .org and .net.

Make sure everyone is clear on what this new coalition is – it's goals, mission, and so forth. Being a member of a third way coalition doesn't prevent members from doing first and second way stuff as well (Handgun Control Inc. can work for stricter gun laws while working in a coalition to enforce existing laws) but it does limit what that coalition does – I buy margaritas, and get dry cleaning done; that I do so at different places diminishes the value of neither.

You need not decide on specific tactics (which legislation to support, for example) but you ought to decide on premises (“we support the 2nd Amendment as interpreted by the Supreme Court”).

Second, assemble the coalition. Strategically construct the group. If you want non-traditional allies, get them signed up first – it will be far easier to persuade American Gun Lovers to join a group whose membership isn't made up of half a dozen anti-gun groups. Then go find those people, and use them to reach out to others – ask them who else ought to be in the coalition, how they ought to be approached, etc. Issues tend to be like small towns or big families; everyone knows everyone, so once you get one person they can help get the second and so on.

Third, develop your structure. Who is in charge? Who is funding it? The answer to the second questions is often the answer to the first question. Where do you meet? Why do you meet? These are, of course, questions all groups need to answer. In answering them in non-traditional coalitions, bear in mind that your new allies may need to be treated differently than people with whom you are usually involved.

The funders and key organizers of the coalition generally make up the group's core. Other organizations and people will drift in and out, depending on the issue, timing, and other factors. Not everyone in the coalition has to participate in all the coalition's activities. For example, Hand Gun Control, Inc. can lead the new coalition as a core member, and also lobby to ban guns. The National Rifle Association can participate in the coalition's gun safety efforts while lobbying against Hand Gun Control, Inc. on the issue of a gun ban. That's fine – in fact, it may be the only way a core-hoc coalition can survive. The whole vive le difference thing.

Fourth, meet. There are good and bad ways to run meetings. I assume you know what they are.

Fifth, care and feeding. Bear in mind no one in this groups trusts each other or you. Your traditional allies think you're selling out, or triangulating, or are impure. Your new allies think you're going to hoodwink them, work behind their back or try to make them look stupid. You need to do all you can to build trust – that means believing you are doing the right thing for the right reasons, and treating everyone else that way as well. Communicate a lot – over-involve, ask too many questions, at meetings check in with the known lefties and known righties. Having gotten the advice – take it. You will not only build the trust needed to succeed, but you might learn something that will improve the odds of winning.

Sixth, pick and win an early victory. Show your new allies, the press and those whom you hope to persuade that this coalition can successfully work together. A good early event is a press conference – it's an easy way to have a good event, and has the added benefit of putting the coalition's members and goals in print making it harder for anyone in the coalition to walk away from either the coalition or the coalition's goals.

Seventh, planning and growth. The coalition needs to develop short and long-term goals, with clear markers for success at every step. This can include petition drives, education efforts, lobbying, conferences, press events, and so forth. The coalition needs to be careful to keep an eye on the original mission while remaining flexible enough to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

Know that members of the coalition will drift in and out, depending on the project or issue, keep your eye on the purpose of the coalition and be careful to not drift into a typical left or right/us versus them group, continue to build trust by sharing new information and soliciting input (new members need to feel the love), and continue to fight battles you can win.

Seventh, win. When you meet a goal, declare victory. Talk about the importance of reaching across old barriers and establishing new relationships. Have a party. Eat chips and dip. Mini-golf.