

Behind the scenes of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition

*The UK's Coalition government of 2010–15 was established with an array of formal agreements and rules for cooperation. However, finds **Felicity Matthews**, the informal norms and micro-level practices of individual relationships were critical to its operation. This opens up a new area in research, which focuses on the detailed practices of multi-party governance.*



PM David Cameron and Deputy PM Nick Clegg, at their first joint press conference, May 2010. Picture: [Number 10](#), via a [\(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#) licence

The formation of coalition government has been a major concern of comparative political science, and for many decades, scholars have devoted significant attention to who gets in and who gets what in terms of parties, portfolios and policies. Similarly, the termination of coalition government has been subject to much analysis, as scholars have sought to explain when and why coalitions fall. Yet despite great swathes of research on its birth and death, surprisingly little attention has been given to the *life* of coalition government.

My latest article, published in [The British Journal of Politics and International Relations](#), addresses this gap by focusing on the *the everyday practice* of coalition governance, as experienced by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition that held office in the UK between 2010 and 2015. In contrast to studies that have focused on what I refer to (in the spirit of [Elinor Ostrom](#)) as ‘the rules-in-form’ of coalition governance, my research instead examines how the ‘rules-in-use’ of coalition governance are interpreted on the ground. How important are they compared to formal mechanisms – such as coalition agreements, portfolio allocation processes and dispute resolution forums – in the day-to-day operation of coalition government? My research draws upon the tools of [organisational sociology](#) to compare the way that coalition government is formally enacted on the ‘frontstage’ and informally negotiated and accommodated on the ‘backstage’.

With regards to the case the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition, the formal architecture of coalition governance was comprehensive, driven by the realpolitik of governing together within a polity organised around the principles of adversarial power-hoarding. This included a wide-ranging [coalition agreement](#), which spanned 31 distinct policy areas and made over 400 separate policy commitments; an [accompanying political document](#) that delineated a series of ‘expectations’ regarding the Coalition’s operation; the proportional allocation of portfolios; the installation of junior ‘watchdog’ ministers in departments to police their partners; and a series of dispute resolution arenas, including the formal Coalition Committee and the informal Quad.

This formal machinery played an important *frontstage* role in terms of ‘setting the scene’, providing a series of signals and cues to different audiences about how the Coalition would operate. Tools such as the coalition agreement also assumed prominence at moments of ‘high drama’, when public recourse was made to its provisions. However, in the day-to-day operation of the Coalition, this machinery assumed less significance. Instead, it was the less visible *backstage* that was of critical importance in terms of making policy, managing tensions and mitigating the impact of frontstage drama. Here, formal party labels mattered less, and effective *informal governance* was often the product of shared political values and norms, a common sense of endeavour, and personal amity and accord. One Conservative minister was ‘quite surprised by how close we stood together on issues’, and another described how ‘a lot of personal friendships sprang up’. Of course, not all coalition relationships were harmonious, as revealed in the memoirs of [several coalition members](#). However, and crucially, there is little evidence to suggest that such discord was solely the product of partisan differences. As one senior Conservative minister made clear, ‘the divisions in government are by no means always on party lines’.

Instead, the backstage management of the Coalition was subject to a number of frontstage pressures, in particular the challenge of reconciling competing loyalties, the management of the wider parliamentary party, the desire to differentiate, and the pressure of prospective elections. Bringing along backbench colleagues was a particular challenge; and one cabinet minister suggested that their party’s backbenchers ‘tend to angrily blame the Liberal Democrats as an excuse for voting against the government’. Such pressures meant that coalition actors were continually required to reconcile a number of competing loyalties (party, government, department) and appease a wide range of audiences (backbenchers, activists, voters). At the same time, coalition governance was subject to important temporal dynamics, as the optimism surrounding the *birth* of the coalition gave way to the reality of coalition *life*, and the prospect of coalition *death* encouraged its partners to focus on securing their individual legacies. More broadly, the day-to-day practice of coalition was beset by a number of institutional limitations as, despite the raft of initiatives detailed above, the Whitehall machine did not readily adapt to the demands of multi-party government.

This analysis points to an important new avenue of coalition research, which moves away from large-n comparison and towards detailed case analyses that treat coalition actors as situated, contingent and contextually bound. By specifying the different dimensions of formal and informal coalition governance, and the different frontstage and backstage arenas in which these transactions occur, my article provides a useful and transferrable analytical framework to capture the dynamics of coalition governance. In turn, by identifying the key challenges that exist in terms of frontstage pressures and institutional limitations, we can draw attention to how coalition actors navigate the demands of multi-party politics, manage the multiple roles that they must occupy, and respond to the dilemmas to which these challenges give rise.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

*It draws on the author’s article, ‘[Formal rules, informal norms and the everyday practice of coalition governance](#)’, published in the *British Journal of Politics and International Affairs*.*

About the author



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