

Political Accountability in Coalition Government

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Abstract

A coalition government is formed when no single political party wins an absolute majority in a general election. To form a stable government and secure a parliamentary majority, multiple parties must negotiate and agree to work together. While this arrangement allows for broader representation and policy consensus, it also introduces significant challenges to political accountability. In a single-party government, voters can easily attribute success or failure to a single ruling party, making it simpler to hold them accountable. However, the diffusion of power and responsibility in a coalition makes this process far more complex. The primary challenge to accountability in a coalition government is the “diffusion of responsibility” or the “clarity of responsibility” problem. When a government’s performance is poor, or a policy fails, it’s difficult for the public to determine which party is to blame. This ambiguity allows individual parties to deflect responsibility and blame their coalition partners. For example, a party with a specific ministry can claim that its efforts were undermined by the other parties in the coalition. This makes it challenging for voters to effectively punish specific parties through retrospective voting, where citizens reward or sanction a government based on its past performance. Moreover, the need for policy compromise within a coalition can weaken accountability. Parties often have to abandon or modify key campaign promises to reach a consensus with their partners. This can lead to a situation where the government’s actions don’t fully reflect the platforms of any of the individual parties.

Keywords:

Political, Accountability, Coalition, Government

Introduction

A coalition government is a system of government where two or more political parties cooperate to form a governing body, typically in a parliamentary system. This arrangement usually occurs when no single party wins a clear majority of seats in a general election, leading to a "hung parliament" or "hung legislature." (David, 2022/

The formation of a coalition government is a process of negotiation and compromise. After an election where no party secures an absolute majority, party leaders engage in discussions to form an alliance. The primary goal is to combine their seats to achieve a majority and, therefore, the ability to pass legislation and govern effectively.

The parties involved negotiate a coalition agreement or common minimum program, which outlines their shared goals, policy priorities, and the distribution of cabinet positions. This document is crucial as it guides the government's agenda and serves as a roadmap for its term in office. A key aspect of a coalition is power-sharing; cabinet posts, including key ministries like finance and foreign affairs, are allocated among the member parties.

Broader Representation: Coalitions bring together diverse political ideologies and interests, ensuring a wider range of the electorate's views are represented in the government. This can lead to more inclusive and well-rounded policies.

Checks and Balances: The need for consensus among coalition partners acts as a natural check on power. No single party can impose its will unilaterally, which can prevent hasty or authoritarian decisions and promotes more deliberative governance.

Political Stability in Fragmented Systems: In countries with a multi-party system, coalitions can provide stability by creating a working majority where one would otherwise not exist. This avoids the constant cycle of minority governments that can be vulnerable to votes of no-confidence.

Instability and Policy Paralysis: A coalition's stability is often fragile and can collapse if a key partner withdraws its support, leading to the fall of the government and the

possibility of snap elections. The need for constant compromise can also result in slow decision-making and policy paralysis.(Collins, 2021)

Compromised Ideologies: To form and maintain a coalition, parties may have to abandon or significantly dilute their core ideological positions and campaign promises. This can be frustrating for their supporters and may lead to a lack of accountability.

"Kingmaker" Syndrome: Smaller, regional parties in a coalition can sometimes wield disproportionate influence, holding the government hostage to their specific demands. This can lead to policies that prioritize a narrow regional agenda over the national interest.

Coalition governments are a common feature of many democracies, particularly those with proportional representation electoral systems.

Germany □□: Germany has a long history of coalition governments, which have often been credited with providing stable and consensus-driven governance. The current government is a "traffic light" coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP).

India □□: India's political landscape has been dominated by coalitions at the national level since the late 1980s. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) have been the two major pre-poll coalitions that have governed the country.

Israel □□: Israeli politics is characterized by a multi-party system, and as a result, the country has had numerous coalition governments. These coalitions are often short-lived and unstable due to the large number of small, ideologically diverse parties.(Hillygus, 2020)

Literature Review

Richard et al. (2020) : In a coalition government, voters may feel that their preferred party didn't deliver on its promises, but they can't be sure if it was due to a lack of will or the constraints of the coalition agreement. This can erode public trust and voter

engagement, as citizens feel their vote doesn't directly translate into the policies they supported.

Foreman et al. (2021) : Internal conflicts and "ministerial drift" further complicate accountability. Ministers from different parties within the same cabinet may have diverging policy interests or unequal access to information.

Michael et al. (2021) : A minister may exploit their informational advantage to pursue their party's agenda, even if it contradicts the broader coalition agreement. While other parties can try to control this "drift," such internal political manoeuvrings can lead to policy paralysis or a lack of coherence in governance, making it hard for the public to hold the government as a collective unit accountable.

Joshua et al. (2022) : Some mechanisms can help improve political accountability in a coalition government. One key tool is a detailed written coalition agreement. This document, negotiated before the government is formed, outlines the shared goals, policy priorities, and division of ministerial portfolios.

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Furthermore, parliamentary oversight and the role of the opposition are crucial for holding coalitions accountable. In a multi-party system, the opposition can effectively scrutinize the government by highlighting internal disagreements and inconsistencies. By questioning ministers and debating policy failures, the opposition can expose which parties are responsible for specific actions or inactions. The media and civil society also play a vital role in this process by investigating and reporting on the government's performance, helping to clarify the lines of responsibility for the public.

Challenges to accountability in coalitions stem from the inherent complexity of multi-party governance. Unlike single-party governments, where responsibility is relatively clear, coalitions distribute power and decision-making across multiple actors, each with its own agenda and voter base. This diffusion of power creates a number of significant hurdles to holding the government, and individual ministers, accountable for their actions.

1. Blurred Lines of Responsibility

The most significant challenge is the lack of clarity of responsibility. When a policy succeeds or fails, it can be difficult for citizens to determine which party, or even which individual minister, is responsible. This is often referred to as a "blame game," where parties in a coalition can deflect criticism by blaming their partners. For example, if a government's economic policy fails, the finance minister's party might blame the minister of industry's party for not creating enough jobs, and vice versa. This makes it challenging for voters to reward or punish parties at the ballot box based on their performance.

2. The "Ministerial Drift" Problem

Each party in a coalition government controls specific ministerial portfolios. The ministerial drift phenomenon occurs when a minister, in an effort to advance their party's interests, deviates from the agreed-upon coalition policy. This can be difficult for other coalition partners to monitor and control due to information asymmetry. The minister and their ministry often have superior knowledge and expertise in their specific policy area, making it easy for them to "drift" from the collective agreement without immediate detection. This undermines the principle of collective responsibility and can lead to policy outcomes that are not in line with the coalition's stated goals.

3. Weakened Electoral Accountability

The diffuse nature of responsibility in coalitions can weaken electoral accountability. Voters find it harder to make informed decisions about who to vote for. The risk of "retrospective voting," where voters punish or reward incumbents based on past performance, is significantly reduced. Parties can rely on their core voters, and the threat of losing office is more often a result of internal political crises within the coalition rather than a direct consequence of a poor electoral performance. This can make governments more responsive to the demands of their coalition partners than to the desires of the electorate.

4. Intra-Coalition Conflict and Sabotage

The potential for intra-coalition conflict and even sabotage is another major challenge. Parties with different ideological stances must compromise to form a government, but these compromises can be fragile. A smaller coalition partner may feel that its core policies are being undermined, leading it to obstruct or even actively sabotage a policy initiative of a larger partner. This can lead to political instability and an inability to implement effective policies. For instance, a junior partner in a coalition might leak sensitive information to the media to embarrass a senior partner, or refuse to vote with the government on a crucial piece of legislation.

5. Solutions and Mitigation

Despite these challenges, some mechanisms can help to mitigate the accountability deficit in coalitions:

Written Coalition Agreements: Many coalitions now publish detailed written agreements that outline their shared policy goals and objectives. This creates a clear public record against which their performance can be judged.

Parliamentary Committees: Strong and active parliamentary committees can provide an additional layer of oversight, holding individual ministers and ministries accountable for their actions regardless of their party affiliation.

Media and Civil Society: An independent and vigilant media, along with robust civil society organizations, can play a crucial role in scrutinizing the actions of coalition governments and holding them to account. They can expose ministerial drift and bring internal conflicts into the public sphere, forcing parties to take responsibility.

While these measures can help, the fundamental challenges to accountability in coalitions remain. The intricate dance of power-sharing and compromise makes it inherently more difficult to trace responsibility and ensure that governments are truly serving the public interest.

Enhancing accountability within a coalition is essential for its effectiveness and sustainability. Without clear mechanisms, coalitions can suffer from a lack of trust,

diffused responsibility, and an inability to achieve their shared objectives. The following mechanisms can significantly improve a coalition's accountability.

A foundational step is to establish a robust governance framework and a written coalition agreement at the outset. This document should explicitly outline the coalition's purpose, goals, and the roles and responsibilities of each member. By formalizing these expectations, all parties are held to a clear standard, reducing ambiguity and the potential for "agency loss" where members act in their own self-interest rather than for the collective good. The agreement should also specify how decisions are made (e.g., consensus, majority vote), how conflicts will be resolved, and the process for adding or removing members. Publicly releasing this agreement can further enhance accountability by allowing external stakeholders to monitor the coalition's progress and commitments.

Transparency is a cornerstone of accountability. Coalitions should implement systems for regular and public reporting on their activities, progress toward goals, and financial management. This includes:

Shared work plans and budgets: A detailed, budgeted work plan ensures that resources are allocated efficiently and that each member's contributions are tracked.

Regular meetings and communication: Consistent communication and update meetings foster an environment of open information sharing and mutual trust.

Performance metrics: Defining specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) indicators allows the coalition to objectively measure its success. For example, a coalition working on environmental issues might track reductions in carbon emissions or the number of trees planted.

Independent monitoring: In some cases, bringing in an external, independent party to monitor the coalition's performance can provide an unbiased assessment and hold members to a higher standard.

These mechanisms ensure that all members—and the public—have a clear understanding of the coalition's performance, making it difficult for any single party to shirk its responsibilities.

Accountability is not just about holding individuals responsible for their failures; it's also about promoting collective ownership and success. Mechanisms that foster shared responsibility include:

Collaborative decision-making: Ensuring all members have a voice in key decisions strengthens their investment in the outcomes.

Empowering all members: A successful coalition avoids a “them and us” dynamic between leading members and the rest of the group. By distributing leadership roles and responsibilities, it ensures that all members are actively engaged and feel a sense of ownership.

Mechanisms for public feedback: Creating channels for public input and feedback—such as client surveys or community forums—can make the coalition more responsive and accountable to the people it aims to serve.

By encouraging active participation and shared ownership, coalitions can build a culture of mutual accountability where all members are invested in the collective's success. A clear and public agreement makes the government's agenda transparent, allowing citizens to judge its performance against a pre-defined set of objectives. It also provides a framework for internal accountability, as a party that deviates from the agreement can be held to account by its partners. Studies have shown that coalitions with written agreements tend to be more productive and stable.

Conclusion

Political accountability in a coalition government is a multifaceted issue. While the need for compromise and the diffusion of responsibility can make it challenging for voters to assign credit or blame, these governments are not inherently unaccountable. The presence of formal coalition agreements, robust parliamentary oversight, and an active media can all help to mitigate the inherent challenges. The

ultimate success of accountability in a coalition government rests on the transparency of the coalition partners and the vigilance of the electorate. Ultimately, it's a shared responsibility: the parties must be clear about their commitments, and the public must remain engaged to ensure that those in power are held responsible for their actions.

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