

# Constructing Conflict and Co-operation The Rhetoric of Coalition Bargaining: The Rhetoric of Coalition Bargaining

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Bargaining is the motor of coalition politics. Indeed, negotiation takes place across the lifetime of a coalition (Lupia and Strøm, 2008: 58), though the literature to date has focused on its role in government formation. During this stage, the prospective partners must, at a minimum, ‘agree on which parties will participate in the government and on the division of cabinet offices. Otherwise, no government could assume office’ (Müller and Strøm, 2008: 159). The question of ‘Who gets in?’ has received considerable attention from scholars, many of whom employ game theoretical approaches to predict bargaining outcomes based on the proximity of the parties’ policy preferences (e.g. Axelrod, 1970; de Swaan, 1973), or to analyse the relation between these preferences and the government that is eventually formed (e.g. Budge and Keman, 1990; Laver and Schofield, 1998). Other coalition theorists, meanwhile, have modelled the allocation of ministerial positions (‘who gets what?’), linking this to portfolio saliency (e.g. Bäck et al., 2010) and to the prestige attached to different cabinet posts (e.g. Warwick and Druckman, 2001; Druckman and Roberts, 2005).

The parties engaged in bargaining to form a coalition face a dilemma between ‘seeking office and seeking votes’ (Narud, 1996: 499). In other words, entering into a governing partnership requires compromise, but the parties must also be able to compete for votes on the basis of a distinct programmatic stance (Narud, 1996: 520-1). This puzzle corresponds to the unity-distinctiveness dilemma, which confronts the partners during

the governance and termination phases of the coalition life cycle. Here, the parties need to work together to govern effectively and present a united public front, while ‘maintain[ing] their political distinctiveness, and hence electoral viability’ (Boston and Bullock, 2012: 350). The tension between co-operation and conflict, unity and distinctiveness, thus pervades the ongoing process of coalition bargaining, and it must be managed if agreements with the governing partner are to be formed and maintained. This in turn suggests that inter-party bargaining is more complex than analyses of payoff distribution are able to capture.

Lupia and Strøm (2008: 59) define bargaining as ‘a process by which actors engage in communication for the purpose of finding a mutually beneficial agreement’. Yet it is precisely this communicative dimension which is neglected in the model-based studies that constitute much of the scholarship on coalition bargaining. The article begins to redress this lacuna by proposing an analytical framework in which coalition bargaining is conceptualised as a negotiation dialogue between the (prospective) governing partners. This dialogue takes place in conditions of uncertainty, and the parties must choose whether to co-operate, or enter into conflict, with each other based on their understanding of the situation at hand. As argued below, language is both a source of this tension and a means for managing it, so the framework developed here offers a new perspective on the unity-distinctiveness dilemma. The role of communicative

interaction is overlooked in the literature, which focuses on the institutional mechanisms for dealing with this challenge (e.g. Boston and Bullock, 2012; Hazell and Yong, 2012), thereby enabling the article to contribute to a second area of coalition studies.

The core contention of this article is that rhetoric is key to managing the competing dynamics of unity and distinctiveness that permeate coalition bargaining. It takes as its starting point Burke's theory of rhetoric as identification, which captures the myriad ways in which 'the members of a group promote social cohesion by acting rhetorically upon themselves and one another' (1969: *xiv*). This account supplements and goes beyond the classical notion of rhetoric as persuasion, and so is suitable for analysing the ongoing negotiation dialogue of coalition politics. The first section of the article lays the theoretical groundwork for this approach. It then distinguishes three forms of identification and division at work within coalition bargaining, namely: ideological, which is concerned with values; instrumental, which is founded on political expediency; and interpersonal, which focuses on the relations between individuals or groups. In the final section, the framework is applied to the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat negotiations on electoral reform. This case is chosen because a number of those involved in, or close to, the talks have published detailed accounts<sup>1</sup>, which permit the analysis of verbatim quotations. The application of the framework demonstrates the

utility of a rhetorical approach to the study of coalition bargaining, while bringing the relational dimension of coalition politics to the fore.

### **Dialogue, rhetoric and identification**

Through dialogue, agents may identify and define an issue, and eventually develop a shared understanding. This in turn provides a basis for co-ordinated action (Black, 2002: 181). There will, of course, be dialogues that do not work, where the participants are unwilling or unable to arrive at a mutually acceptable understanding of the problem at hand (Black, 2002: 182). In these situations, the speakers may agree to differ and co-operation does not follow. Dialogue takes place within a context of ambiguity, where meanings are not fixed and situations can be interpreted in a variety of ways (Hajer and Laws, 2006). Consequently, actors must identify the issues at stake before they can begin to address them. This process of selectively emphasising aspects of a situation can be understood through the concept of the frame. Hajer and Laws explain (2006: 259) that frames are ‘expressed by individuals, but also rooted in and sustained by social interaction’. On this view, the ordering of complex realities is relational, a product of language use, and the sharing of a frame both reinforces and perpetuates its interpretation of the issue at hand.

One approach to the study of dialogue is discourse analysis, which focuses on the ‘dynamic, often temporally changeable meanings that shape social practices and that are actively transformed across time and space’ (Martin, 2014: 11). It also attends to the role of discourses in shaping us as subjects (e.g. as ‘politician’ or ‘protester’) and creating positions from which we can speak (or not). Given that discourse theory operates with a relational ontology, it appears well suited to an investigation of how the participants in a dialogue form an interpretation of an issue, and of ‘what understandings are shared and by whom ... [and] which are contested and between whom’ (Black, 2012: 196). However, this perspective pays insufficient attention to the questions of why certain frames and discourses come to be accepted over others, and of how these dominant interpretations are contested, transformed and (perhaps) superseded.<sup>2</sup> To address them, we need to enter the realm of rhetorical analysis.

Rhetoric is concerned with ‘the study of how, in politics, we come to conceive a situation in a certain way, and of how we may get others to conceive it similarly (such that they may act in concert with us)’ (Finlayson, 2006: 544). There are several approaches to rhetorical study (e.g. Atkins, 2011; Finlayson, 2006; Martin, 2014: ch. 6) but, for our purposes, the most relevant is Burke’s theory of language as symbolic action. This theory proceeds from the premise that ‘language reflects, selects, and

deflects as a way of shaping the symbol systems that allow us to cope with the world' (Stob, 2008: 139). In other words, it directs our attention to some aspects of a situation over others, and so affords us a means of dealing with ambiguity. This function is captured in the concept of a 'terministic screen', which orders reality according to the principles of continuity and discontinuity (Burke, 1966: 50). As Burke puts it (1966: 49), there are 'terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart'. Crucially, terministic screens – like other ordering devices – may be contested; after all, 'there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology' (Burke, 1966: 50).

It is through the opposing principles of continuity and discontinuity that 'A can feel himself [sic] identified with B, or he can think of himself as disassociated from B' (Burke, 1966: 49). This statement calls attention to the relational aspect of Burke's theory, at the heart of which is the concept of identification. Here, Burke writes (1969: 46):

A speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his [sic] act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience.

There is a strategic element involved, as a speaker will select the signs they believe are most likely to appeal to their audience, and so increase the likelihood of identification occurring. If identification between two people is achieved, they are said to be ‘consubstantial’: their interests are joined and yet each remains distinct, an ‘individual locus of motives’ (Burke, 1969: 21). Such consubstantiality then provides a basis for co-operative action.

Burke’s theory is appropriate to the analysis of the negotiation dialogue between the (prospective) partners in a coalition government, which takes place in conditions of ambiguity. In seeking to order reality, political actors will use a terministic screen based on either continuity or discontinuity. This choice lies at the root of the unity-distinctiveness dilemma, as figures from one party must decide whether to co-operate with, or distance themselves from, the other. If they opt for unity, they need to achieve identification with their partner and so facilitate co-operation. Conversely, a strategy based on distinctiveness requires the rhetoric of division, which emphasises the differences between the parties and facilitates the reassertion of a separate identity. For the purposes of this article, the concepts of identification and division are disaggregated into three forms – ideological, instrumental and interpersonal – all of which feature in



the negotiation dialogue that takes place within coalition governments. These three modes of identification and division are examined next.

### **Ideological identification and division**

According to Budge and Laver (1986: 607), the ‘parties’ ideological closeness or policy agreement is regarded [by many scholars] as indispensable to the coalition’s formation and stability’. Despite this, they continue (1986: 608), analysts rarely treat ideology as a variable in its own right, and instead rely on ‘admittedly static and imperfect representations’ of the parties’ core commitments and policy positions. Budge and Laver’s criticism is borne out by studies that conceive of ideologies as ‘policy motivations’ (Laver and Schofield, 1998: 111) or count them among the parties’ ‘preferences’ (Müller et al., 2008). From the perspective of rhetorical analysis, this neglect of ideology is a serious oversight. After all, ideologies are not simply systems of ideas that shape political thinking; they also ‘provide actors with a series of locally established “commonplace” arguments, which must be adapted to the demands of the situation’. Furthermore, an ideology supplies a set of criteria for evaluating whether an argument is good or bad (Finlayson, 2012: 759), whether it constitutes an appropriate means of inviting identification. Alongside these functions, ideology gives an indication of how a party might envisage common ground with a coalition partner, as well as of

the tensions that may arise between them.<sup>3</sup> An appreciation of the ideological dimension of coalition politics can therefore shed new light on the competing dynamics of unity and distinctiveness that characterise the negotiation dialogue between the parties involved.

The ambiguity of the political environment is mirrored in the inherent contestability of the concepts present within an ideology. As Freedman explains (1998: 54), the interpretations attached to these political concepts are derived from a potentially limitless and essentially contestable assortment of meanings, and thus will exhibit a wide range of variations. The ideological response to this conceptual indeterminacy takes the form of ‘decontestation’, a process whereby a specific meaning is assigned to each of the concepts that comprise an ideology (Freedman, 1998: 83). Political actors then make use of these decontested concepts in their efforts both to order reality and to persuade others to accept their definition of the issue. In Burke’s terms, a politician will employ a terministic screen that stresses the continuity between, say, a policy proposal and a value it is intended to realise. If a (prospective) coalition partner accepts this interpretation, their shared understanding provides a basis for ideological identification. The parties’ consubstantiality then paves the way for co-ordinated action. Although ideological proximity is a key determinant of coalition formation and durability, it may come at the cost of electoral distinctiveness – particularly for the smaller party. Hence,

the latter may utilise a terministic screen that emphasises the discontinuity between their values and an initiative proposed by the senior partner, and so directs attention to the ideological differences that exist between the parties.

Through rhetorical strategising, political actors may play on the ambiguity of ideological claims to bring together competing demands (Atkins, 2011: 94), and thus attain consubstantiality. For instance, a socialist may invite identification with a liberal by arguing that their preferred policy will promote 'equality' broadly conceived, as opposed to their specific goal of greater equality of outcome. If the liberal then interprets the argument in terms of their own belief in equal worth and accepts it, the socialist has successfully reconciled the two distinct demands under a single umbrella concept and ideological identification is established. Consubstantiality may also be achieved if the representatives of one party appeal to their (prospective) coalition partner's core commitments in making the case for a favoured objective, even if they do not share those values themselves. This form of rhetorical strategising may afford an effective means of redefining the situation but, in practice, a party is constrained by the argumentative logics of its own ideology. In other words, if it moves the dispute too far onto the partner's territory it endangers its future bargaining power, while risking the wrath of its supporters. The preservation of ideological distinctiveness thus becomes a matter of partisan interest.

As noted above, ideology shapes a party's view of what constitutes an acceptable common ground with the (prospective) coalition partner. This conception is closely linked to the party's vision for the nation's future, and in turn affects the range of available identification strategies. Taking the 2010 UK general election manifestos as an example, the three main parties committed themselves to the goal of building a stronger society. To this end, the Liberal Democrats (2010: 9) advocated a fairer distribution of power, 'be it economic, social, political or financial', while the Conservative Party (2010: *viii*) pledged to promote individual and social responsibility and Labour (2010: 3) asserted that 'active, reforming government ... helps make people powerful'. Although *prima facie* different, the Liberal Democrat and Conservative visions are founded on a belief in limited government. This commitment is central to their conceptions of a beneficial arrangement, as it affords them a means of promoting their respective goals of greater freedom and responsibility. Indeed, the party leaderships achieved ideological identification during the initial negotiations by linking limited government to reductions in public expenditure. Once in office, their consubstantiality facilitated co-operation on a programme of austerity intended to reduce the size of the state (Atkins, 2015: 87). By contrast, and despite their shared belief in individual empowerment, identification between the Liberal Democrats and Labour would have been difficult. Due to the latter's commitment to state intervention, the quest for

common ideological ground would demand substantial compromise, the limits of which are largely determined by the willingness of party members to accept the dilution of their core values (see Laver and Schofield, 1998: 24). Considerations of party unity are likely to come into play at this point, highlighting the importance of interests in coalition bargaining.

### **Instrumental identification and division**

As Hajer points out (1997: 59), language ‘influences the perception of interests and preference. Interests ... cannot be assumed as given. Interests are intersubjectively constituted through discourse’. It follows that political parties engage in internal dialogues about the nature of their political environment, and what their interests are in these circumstances. Given that parties comprise different factions and thus are not unitary actors, strategies of identification and division will be employed until a compromise is reached. Thus, on entering into coalition negotiations, each team will bring with it a predefined conception of their party’s interests and will seek to achieve identification on this basis. As the talks take place within conditions of ambiguity, it is possible that, through dialogue, the actors involved will discover shared interests, and that these in turn will provide a starting point for inter-party agreement and co-operation during the governance stage. However, there is a persistent tension between these

newly-discovered coalition interests and pre-constituted partisan interests, which the actors must manage if they are to sustain the partnership while preserving their party's distinct identity. It is here that the instrumental forms of identification and division come into play, as we will see next.

At the formation stage, the primary goal is to form an administration. After all, it is widely acknowledged that parties prefer government to opposition, and so 'office may be valued not only because of its intrinsic qualities but because it is a necessary prerequisite for exercising policy influence' (Verzichelli, 2008: 237). The negotiating parties will therefore seek to invite identification based on a common interest in achieving power, though the form the government will take is far from certain. So, for instance, one party may see a full coalition as the optimal means of achieving its goals, while the other may be undecided. Using a terministic screen, the former will define the situation so that a coalition appears to be the only viable option, perhaps by calling attention to the need for stability in the face of a national crisis or to the perceived weakness of minority governments. If the latter is persuaded that a coalition is the best course of action, in terms of enhancing its public image, say, or maximising governmental effectiveness, then instrumental identification has been achieved and the parties are consubstantial.

The governing partners may also share an interest in sustaining the coalition for the duration of the parliamentary term. In the UK, for example, senior Conservative figures believed a substantial period in government would add to their party's authority, while some leading Liberal Democrats were eager to avoid an early general election for financial reasons (Wilson, 2010: 176, 140). Although the two parties were instrumentally identified on the need for coalition stability, a major concern for each in the governance stage is to 'enhance their party's electoral prospects and avoid decisions that will have adverse electoral implications' (Müller et al., 2008: 11). As Laver and Schofield explain (1998: 187), 'parties may lose votes if they appear to exert no influence over policy ... [perhaps] by going into a government that enacts policies that differ from those that they promised at election time'. This highlights the importance of maintaining party distinctiveness, particularly for the junior partner whose role in the coalition may be less visible to the electorate (Boston and Bullock, 2012). Thus, the smaller party will need to emphasise the discontinuity between their predefined interests and certain policy commitments associated with the senior partner, and so foster instrumental division between them.

Additionally, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats attained instrumental identification based on a mutually acceptable understanding of the 'national interest' (Atkins, 2015). This is evident in their claim that the gravity of Britain's economic

difficulties demanded the two parties should ‘put aside their differences on economic policy and work together in the national interest to heal the national finances and rebalance the economy’ (Gamble, 2012: 67). Specifically, the party leaderships defined the 2008 global financial crisis as a ‘crisis of debt’ which, they argued, was caused by the alleged fiscal irresponsibility of the previous Labour governments and could only be addressed by significant cuts to public spending. This narrative incorporated elements from domains such as economics, politics and social policy, and so simplified the crisis while giving it an apparent coherence. The deficit thus functioned as a narrative that, through repetition, became the received understanding of the situation (Gamble, 2012: 67). In an example of identification through antithesis (Burke, 1972: 28), this economic narrative also enabled the coalition partners to overcome their differences and to unite behind the cause of deficit reduction in opposition to a common enemy, namely the Labour Party.

### **Interpersonal identification and division**

This form of identification is concerned with the relations between individuals or groups. It is pertinent to the study of coalition politics because



Uncertainty about the credibility and opportunism of (potential) coalition partners are particular problems in coalition bargaining processes, especially as parliamentary parties are at least in partial competition with each other and because party leaders need to win the support of their backbenchers for inter-party agreements at leadership level (Saalfeld, 2008: 335).

Therefore, the parties must endeavour to build a rapport with the prospective partner. A failure to do so may increase the risk of personal conflict and early cabinet termination, though as Damgaard points out (2008: 312), the latter phenomenon is often overdetermined and ‘many of the participants [in the government] have strategic reasons to conceal the real forces at work’. With this caveat in mind, we turn to the interpersonal aspect of the negotiation dialogue that characterises coalition politics.

The interpersonal mode of identification and division encompasses such continua as trust-mistrust, admiration-disapproval and respect-disrespect. It is somewhat nebulous in comparison to the ideological and instrumental forms, as it stems from personal chemistry (or a lack thereof) as much as it does from rhetorical strategising. Nevertheless, these sentiments can be created rhetorically, perhaps through the use of a terministic screen that demonstrates a similar understanding of the issue at hand or through the giving of the signs of consubstantiality. They can also arise as ‘a by-product

of a situation which has other chief aims' (Brockriede, 1968: 2), among which may be the establishment of another form of identification. For the purposes of this discussion, the goals of interpersonal identification and division are termed 'rapport' and 'friction' respectively.

Rapport is an important consideration when selecting a negotiating team, as the leader and the wider membership need to trust the participants to represent their party's values and interests, and so to bargain effectively on their behalf. While all three UK parties chose their negotiators on this basis (Laws, 2010: 14-15; Wilson, 2010: 52; Adonis, 2013: 33) the Liberal Democrats were the best prepared, having assembled their team in late 2009 (Laws, 2010: 13). Consequently, the negotiators were able to build a rapport and reach a shared understanding of their party's interests in advance of the general election. A significant omission from the team was Vince Cable, the Treasury Spokesperson, which Adonis attributes (2013: 83) to a difficult relationship with the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg. However, Cable's absence ensured that 'none of the prominent figures from the left were included in the negotiating team' (Wilson, 2010: 37), which arguably facilitated the party's talks with the Conservatives.

During the formation stage, former adversaries need to ascertain whether they can govern together. The creation of rapport is vital here, and to this end the members of a

negotiating team must persuade their counterparts that they take the talks seriously and, moreover, are receptive to the idea of forming a partnership. Such an attempt at interpersonal identification was evident in the 2010 negotiations<sup>4</sup>, which opened with William Hague (quoted in Laws, 2010: 67) telling the Liberal Democrats that the Conservatives ‘sincerely want this to work’. This declaration set the tone for the talks, and indeed David Laws (2010: 67; see also Wilson, 2010: 105) was gratified to discover that the Conservative negotiators were ‘able to engage in a sensible, mature and respectful way with our team’. The participants’ demonstrations of an open, constructive attitude thus enabled them to establish rapport, which was mirrored in the warm relationship between Clegg and the Conservative leader, David Cameron (Paun, 2011: 254). While important for coalition formation and unity, this interpersonal identification would contribute to a loss of electoral distinctiveness for the Liberal Democrats, who by late 2010 were widely seen as ‘a gang of Tory stooges’ following their U-turn on university tuition fees (d’Ancona, 2013: 64). So, although some inter-party friction at the senior level can provide a basis for differentiation, too much can impede the functioning of government and perhaps result in its early termination (Damgaard, 2008: 304).

Interpersonal friction was a key factor in the Liberal Democrats’ decision not to enter into coalition with Labour. As Clegg puts it (quoted in Laws 2010: 122; see also

Adonis, 2013: 5), the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was ‘impossible to deal with’, while Laws claims (2010: 273-4) that Labour’s negotiating team ‘seemed determined to wreck or undermine the very talks which they were engaged in’. However, the Labour negotiator Andrew Adonis challenges Laws’s account, speculating that the Liberal Democrats used interpersonal division as an alibi for their decision to go with the Conservatives, rather than form a progressive alliance with Labour (2013: 154; see also Wilson, 2010: 77). Nevertheless, the friction between Clegg and Brown is well documented and this, in conjunction with the Liberal Democrats’ concern that a ‘traffic light coalition’ would soon fall apart (Laws, 2010: 158), effectively ruled out a governing partnership with Labour. Interpersonal and instrumental divisions thus outweighed the parties’ apparent ideological convergence on economic policy and electoral reform (see Adonis, 2013: 27).

It is worth noting that the three modes of identification and division are neither hierarchical nor mutually exclusive, as the complexities of real-world politics mean that their importance will vary between different negotiations. This is due to such factors as how the parties defined their interests, the strength of their commitment to ‘red line’ issues, and the degree of rapport between their representatives. Additionally, more than one form of identification or division may be at work within the same rhetorical situation. Indeed, the presence (or absence) of interpersonal identification ‘may have a

profound influence on whether other dimensions vary, as well as on how they vary' (Brockriede, 1968: 2). Similarly, these conditions of ambiguity entail that the imperatives of unity and distinctiveness are present within all three of the modes discussed above, making this framework a useful tool for investigating the rhetorical dynamics of coalition bargaining. The next section applies the framework to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat negotiations on electoral reform.

### **The UK coalition negotiations: Electoral reform**

Electoral reform was the most contentious issue in the negotiations, which took place between 7 and 11 May 2010. In their manifesto, the Conservative Party (2010: 67) supported the first-past-the-post system for general elections because it 'gives voters the chance to kick out a government they are fed up with'. This position is founded on a 'populist' notion of fairness, which demands that 'voters, not party leaders, should choose governments'. Post-election bargaining is therefore seen as unfair because it removes the power to choose a government from the electorate and places it in the hands of party leaders (Blau, 2004: 167). The Conservatives (2010: 67) also committed themselves to 'fair vote' reforms, pledging to 'equalise the size of constituency electorates' and 'conduct a boundary review to implement these changes within five years'. These measures drew on a distributive conception of fairness, according to

which every MP should represent an equal number of voters and each citizen's ballot carries the same weight. Reinforcing the ideological commitment to these proposals was a belief that first-past-the-post served the Conservatives' interests by giving them 'regular opportunities to hold power' as a majority government, and that the boundary changes would work to their advantage (Laws, 2016: 88; Hazell and Yong, 2012: 159-60).

Like the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats (2010: 87-8) promised to introduce 'fair votes', but they differed in their view of how this was to be achieved. Specifically, their manifesto advocated proportional representation for Westminster elections in the form of the Single Transferable Vote system, which would also reduce the number of parliamentary seats by 150. This proposal is based on the 'equality' conception of fairness, which requires that 'each citizen and party should be treated equally, as in the idea of "one person, one vote, one value"' (Blau, 2004: 167). As such, it is consistent with the core liberal belief in the equal worth of all individuals. The Liberal Democrats also had partisan interests involved, as they believed a change in the electoral system would compensate for the loss of support resulting from their participation in a coalition government (Rennard in Laws, 2016: 86; d'Ancona, 2013: 75). So, although both parties justified their proposed political reforms in terms of fairness, their divergent

understandings of this contested concept entailed different means of achieving their objectives.

The Liberal Democrats have a longstanding commitment to electoral reform, and indeed it would be a ‘bottom-line negotiating issue’ in any coalition talks (Laws, 2010: 88). Before the general election, Laws had advised Clegg and the members of the negotiating team that there was only one way of persuading the Conservatives, to whom proportional representation was anathema, to accept a referendum on reform for Westminster elections. This was to

Push for a referendum on the most modest form of electoral reform – the Alternative Vote ... and to link this to Lib Dem support for the Conservatives’ own reform plan, which was to reduce the number of parliamentary seats and to remove Labour over-representation (paraphrased in Laws, 2010: 100; see also Wilson, 2010: 161).

In Burke’s terms, Laws’s strategy involved using a terministic screen based on continuity to join the two parties’ proposals together. This would then provide a basis for instrumental identification by offering the Conservatives ‘something which would be likely to offset any loss of seats that AV might deliver’ (Laws, 2010: 100). Equally,

and given that the Liberal Democrats regarded AV as a fairer system than first-past-the-post, this proposal represented an ideologically acceptable compromise. It also accorded with their perceived partisan interests; indeed Clegg has described AV as a ‘baby step in the right direction’ towards the reform of Westminster elections (quoted in Wilson, 2010: 25).

In the event, the 2010 general election produced a hung parliament with the Conservatives as the largest party. In the light of their divergent views on electoral reform it is unsurprising that the talks between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats soon became deadlocked, jeopardising their preferred option of a partnership government (Wilson, 2010: 164; Laws, 2010: 99-100). Both had instrumental reasons for favouring this outcome, with Cameron believing a coalition would deflect attention from the Conservatives’ failure to win an outright majority, while the Liberal Democrats ‘had a vested interest in showing the public that coalitions could work in practice’ (Hazell and Yong, 2012: 31). The latter had already ruled out a confidence and supply arrangement, as it would result in them ‘taking no credit for the government’s achievements, but all the pain for sustaining it in office’ (Huhne quoted in Laws, 2010: 18; Clegg, 2016: 147) and therefore damage their electoral interests.



Thus, on 9 May, the Liberal Democrats implemented Laws's strategy, and Danny Alexander (quoted in Laws, 2010: 101) told the Conservative team that 'we will support your proposals on redrawing the constituency boundaries, to make voting fairer. But in return, we want your support for a referendum on a reformed first-past-the-post system'.<sup>5</sup> Here, he employed a terministic screen that directed his listeners' attention to the continuity between AV and the existing electoral system (viz. 'reformed first-past-the-post'). In this way, Alexander perhaps sought to downplay the impact of the change and make it more palatable to the Conservatives. Likewise, by bringing together these demands under the umbrella of 'fairness' (broadly conceived), the Liberal Democrats invited ideological identification, on which basis the parties could work together to 'usher in a new and more co-operative politics and a fairer voting system'(Alexander, paraphrased in Laws, 2010: 101).

However, Alexander's effort to redefine the issue of voting reform was rejected, with Hague asserting (quoted in Laws, 2010: 101) that 'the Conservatives are opposed as a party to both the Alternative Vote and proportional representation. And calling AV "reformed first-past-the-post" won't change our people's minds!'. Here, Hague was constrained by the argumentative logics of Conservative ideology, specifically its commitment to preserve traditional institutions. As such, the Liberal Democrats' attempt to invite identification was unsuccessful, and they therefore had to change their

tactics. It was perhaps with this ideological constraint in mind that Laws responded (quoted in Laws, 2010: 102):

Surely most Conservative MPs are opposed to PR and not AV? AV is a far more incremental and modest change. And in a coalition, the old assumptions on how people use their second preferences could change. AV might not be bad for the Conservatives under those circumstances.

With these words, Laws appealed to both the Conservatives' belief in gradual change and their electoral interests, and so sought to persuade them to identify ideologically and instrumentally with the Liberal Democrats on their proposals for a referendum on AV.

Again, this identification strategy was unsuccessful and the talks reached an impasse. For George Osborne, 'the best Conservative offer on this is going to be equalisation of seat size and a free vote in the Commons on an AV referendum', while Laws's position was that: 'We cannot persuade Lib Dem MPs to vote for a Lib Dem-Conservative coalition without [electoral reform]' (both quoted in Laws, 2010: 103; see also Wilson, 2010: 162-3). Faced with the prospect of the Liberal Democrats reaching an agreement with Labour, on 10 May David Cameron sought the assent of his parliamentary party to

offer a referendum on AV (Wilson, 2010: 219; Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010: 213-14). While a number of senior figures supported the move, in general Conservative MPs adhere to the traditional view of the constitution. As such, they ‘do not regard the political system as broken and, if there is to be change, it should be incremental, tackling proven ills, not radical change fundamentally challenging the basics of a nation’s constitutional underpinnings’ (Norton and Thompson, 2015: 130). In essence, the parliamentary Conservative Party faced a choice between pragmatism and principles.

To persuade MPs to support the offer of a referendum, the Conservative grandee Sir Malcolm Rifkind invited (quoted in Wilson, 2010: 220) instrumental identification based on a conception of the national interest: ‘The Conservative Party’s judgement has always been that in any crucial decision we have to address the public interest, not the party interest. And the public interest is economic stability’. Although many backbenchers had grave misgivings about crossing their party’s ‘red line’ on voting reform, few voiced their concerns and the Conservative leadership offered the Liberal Democrats a deal on AV (Wilson, 2010: 220-1; Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010: 214). In contrast, divisions within the Liberal Democrats centred on the choice of governing partner. Whereas those committed to a realignment of the centre-left favoured Labour (Clegg, 2016: 165; Laws, 2010: 197), the majority of MPs regarded a coalition with the

Conservatives as the best means of advancing their party's interests. In Clegg's words (2016: 178; see also Laws, 2010: 77):

If we were ever to become a credible party of government, then we would need to show that we could govern in tough times, and finally put an end to the perception of us as a nice but ineffectual party of opposition.

Thus, each parliamentary party was, for the most part, instrumentally consubstantial, but their identification was based on different grounds.

In its *Programme for Government* (HM Government, 2010: 26), the Coalition pledged to bring forward measures to create 'fewer and more equal sized constituencies' and to hold a referendum on AV. The Liberal Democrats had agreed to the proposed boundary changes because they were already committed to reducing the number of MPs, and they shared the Conservative Party's belief that 'the present unequal size of constituency electorates just wasn't fair' (Laws, 2010: 101). As such, they identified with the Conservatives' ideological commitment to a distributive notion of fairness which, like their own conception of fairness as equality, is founded on the idea that every vote should carry the same weight. In short, the two parties had succeeded in finding a mutually acceptable common ground. However, the Liberal Democrats failed to achieve

ideological identification on AV. This is because the equality conception of fairness tends to clash with the populist idea endorsed by the Conservatives, as ‘fairness in translating votes to seats may lead to unfairness in translating seats to power’ (Blau, 2004: 173). Thus, the inherent ambiguity of ‘fairness’ that had enabled the parties to achieve consubstantiality on the issue of equalised boundaries prevented them from attaining ideological identification on electoral reform. On this issue, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats instead were instrumentally consubstantial, as an agreement would enable the parties not only to take power, but to claim that they were acting in the national interest (Laws, 2010: 199; Wilson, 2010: 210-12). This in turn would enhance their standing in the eyes of the public, while contributing to the Coalition’s early narrative of governmental unity.

## **Conclusion**

As Laver and Schofield observe (1998: 187), it has become common in coalition scholarship to conceive of policy bargaining as an attempt to ‘minimise the policy distance between a party’s ideal policy point and the policy point of the government’. A rhetorical analysis builds on this understanding by illuminating how, through strategies of identification and division, such compromises are reached, and how considerations of unity and distinctiveness influence both the choice of governing partner and subsequent

policy outcomes. The application of the framework reveals that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats achieved identification in all three dimensions, which undoubtedly contributed to the Coalition's survival for a full parliamentary term. While the prizes for Cameron included 'government, not opposition; stability, not chaos; [and] joint responsibility for tough decisions' (Laws, 2010: 51), the Liberal Democrats gravely overestimated the benefits they would derive from coalition. Their miscalculation resulted from an ideological and instrumental preoccupation with electoral reform, which blinded them to the possibility that they would lose the AV referendum. This is evident in Huhne's statement that:

Our historic mission is to create a British Liberal party whose influence will be embedded in our politics through a reformed voting system ... Only a Conservative coalition now offers ... the prize of a guaranteed place in British politics for a strong liberal force (quoted in Laws, 2010: 158).

In their efforts to realise this goal, the Liberal Democrats broke a number of pre-election pledges, 'most obviously over tuition fees, but also over the "U-turn" on dealing with the fiscal deficit' (Hazell and Yong, 2012: 130). Their perceived partisan interest in making a success of coalition government thus resulted in an early loss of distinctiveness from which the party never recovered.

The framework opens up several avenues for further research. If we accept Lupia and Strøm's claim (2008: 59) that, at any stage of a coalition's life cycle, 'coalition decisions are the result of bargaining', then scholars might explore how its constituent parties employ the three modes of identification and division to manage the unity-distinctiveness dilemma during the governance phase, or to reassert their unique identities in the run-up to a general election. Additionally, the negotiation dialogue that takes place within minority governments or surplus governments warrants academic attention, as much of the literature is concerned with minimal winning coalitions. Finally, the framework could guide analyses of coalition bargaining in democratic societies beyond the UK, and so pave the way for international comparative studies. Such research would complement existing scholarship on the bargaining process, while prising open the 'black box' of coalition politics a little further.

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<sup>1</sup> Laws's account (2010: 9-10) is based on transcripts and detailed notes of the meetings, and the accuracy of his recollections is verified by others involved in the negotiations. The article draws primarily on this text though, as far as possible, only verbatim quotations are included in the analysis. For verification purposes, these are triangulated with other sources.

<sup>2</sup> This oversight is evident in Hajer and Laws's (2006) discussion of ordering devices. Meanwhile, Black notes (2012: 196) that analyses of regulatory conversations should attend to the rhetorical techniques employed in the development and contestation of these understandings, but does not consider them herself. In contrast, rhetorical study 'explores the moments at which discursive "regimes" are introduced and reproduced through argument', and so 'permits analysis of concrete interventions that aspire to become effective, perhaps dominant discourses' (Martin, 2014: 12).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that 'political parties are themselves not unitary actors, so attention should also be paid to the priorities of different wings of the two movements' (Paun, 2011: 258).

<sup>4</sup> The Conservative negotiators were the MPs William Hague, Oliver Letwin and George Osborne, and Cameron's chief of staff, Ed Llewellyn, while the Liberal

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Democrat team comprised the MPs Danny Alexander (chair), Chris Huhne, David Laws and Andrew Stunnell (Laws, 2010: 52-3).

<sup>5</sup> The argument that AV is a form of first-past-the-post was also made by Huhne and Clegg (Wilson, 2010: 162, 207), lending support to Laws's account of the Liberal Democrats' pre-election strategising.