The Coalition Ceiling:

Narrative, Identity, and the Limits of Collective Action

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Abstract

Collective action depends on diverse actors aligning around shared goals, yet coalitions frequently stall or fail to expand even when underlying interests appear broadly compatible. Existing explanations emphasize resource constraints, institutional barriers, or preference divergence, but give limited attention to how narratives themselves impose structural limits on coalition growth.

This paper introduces the coalition ceiling to describe the maximum breadth of actors who can align with a movement's narrative without destabilizing its coherence. Drawing on framing theory, political psychology, and interpretive communication, it argues that narrative choices, particularly moral specification and attribution of responsibility, simultaneously generate internal cohesion and activate identity-based resistance among potential allies. These dynamics produce a structural tradeoff endogenous to narrative design.

The paper advances a framework for understanding coalition limits in polarized systems, identifying narrative design as a structural determinant and offering testable propositions.

Introduction

Collective action depends on the ability of diverse actors to align around shared goals. A substantial body of scholarship has examined how such alignment is achieved, emphasizing the roles of material interests, institutional incentives, and strategic framing. Research in social movement theory has shown how narratives mobilize support by defining problems, assigning

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responsibility, and motivating participation (Snow & Benford, 1988; Gamson, 1992), while political science has explored how coalitions form and stabilize through bargaining and resource exchange (Riker, 1962). Work in political psychology has demonstrated that individuals interpret information in ways shaped by identity and prior beliefs (Kahan, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and communication theory has established that meaning is actively constructed differently across audiences (Hall, 1980; Fish, 1980).

Despite these advances, an important dimension of coalition formation remains undertheorized: the structural limits of coalition expansion. In practice, movements frequently encounter situations in which further growth becomes difficult even when underlying interests appear aligned. Coalitions stall, fragment, or fail to broaden—not solely because of resource constraints or institutional barriers, but because the narratives that sustain them constrain who can plausibly align. This paper introduces the concept of the coalition ceiling to address this gap. The coalition ceiling refers to the maximum breadth of actors who can align with a movement's narrative without destabilizing its internal coherence—a limit produced not only by external opposition but endogenously through the language movements use to define themselves.

While prior research has examined how narratives facilitate mobilization and alignment, this paper shifts the analytical focus to the structural limits of alignment. It argues that narrative design not only enables coalition formation but also endogenously constrains its expansion, producing predictable limits on coalition breadth even under conditions of shared material interest. Narrative is therefore not merely a tool of persuasion—it is a structural determinant of who can participate in collective action.

The argument speaks directly to long-standing concerns in political science regarding the formation and durability of coalitions in pluralistic societies. Classical accounts emphasize strategic behavior (Riker, 1962), the expansion and contraction of conflict (Schattschneider, 1960), and the role of shared belief systems in stabilizing advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, 1988). While these approaches illuminate the strategic and institutional dimensions of coalition formation, they provide less leverage for explaining why coalitions fail to expand even when interests appear aligned. The coalition ceiling complements these accounts by identifying narrative design as a structural mechanism that shapes the boundaries of possible coalition membership.

By foregrounding narrative design as a structural determinant of coalition limits, the paper makes two contributions. First, it extends framing theory by shifting attention from the mechanisms of mobilization to the structural limits of alignment. Second, it integrates insights from social identity research and interpretive theory to show how narrative choices shape not only how issues are understood, but which actors can participate in collective action. Narrative design thereby becomes a central determinant of coalition potential.

The argument proceeds in five sections. Section 1 situates the coalition ceiling concept within and against existing literature on framing, coalition formation, and interpretive divergence, establishing where prior theories fall short. Section 2 examines how identity-mediated cognition shapes narrative reception and how villain assignment produces reciprocal mobilization. Section 3 defines the coalition ceiling formally, explains its dual internal and external constraint structure, and identifies narrative choice as its primary mechanism. Section 4 develops the framework's analytical implications by examining five persistent empirical puzzles in the study of collective action. Section 5 draws conclusions and outlines a research agenda with specific testable propositions.

1. Narrative, Framing, and the Limits of Coalition Formation

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Research on collective action has long emphasized the role of narratives in mobilizing support and facilitating coordination among actors. Building on foundational work by Goffman (1974), social movement scholars have conceptualized framing as a process through which movements construct meaning by defining problems, attributing responsibility, and articulating pathways for action. Snow and Benford (1988) identify diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames as central mechanisms through which movements recruit participants and sustain engagement. Frame alignment processes—bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation—are understood as strategies for expanding participation and building coalitions across diverse constituencies. Work on collective action frames emphasizes the construction of narratives that articulate injustice, establish agency, and foster shared identity (Gamson, 1992).

This literature has primarily focused on how frames generate resonance—how they align with the beliefs, values, and experiences of target audiences. While these approaches provide a robust account of how movements mobilize support, they treat coalition expansion largely as a problem of improving alignment. When expansion stalls, the implicit diagnosis is insufficient resonance—a communication failure to be corrected through better framing, more compelling messengers, or broader distribution. The possibility that expansion failure might be structurally produced by the narrative choices that constitute the movement's core identity has received far less theoretical attention. Framing processes do not operate only as mechanisms of inclusion; they also function as mechanisms of exclusion, shaping not only who joins a coalition but who cannot.

This gap is sharpened by insights from interpretive theory and communication studies. Hall (1980) demonstrates that messages are encoded with preferred meanings but decoded in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways depending on the interpretive frameworks of audiences. Fish (1980) extends this by showing that meaning is not inherent in texts but emerges through the shared assumptions of interpretive communities—communities that differ across social groups. Ceccarelli (1998) introduces the concept of polysemy to capture the capacity of a single message to sustain multiple meanings, distinguishing between strategic ambiguity, which can facilitate cooperation across diverse audiences, and interpretive divergence, where differences in understanding remain unresolved and become sources of instability. Castells (2009) further argues that the construction of meaning is central to the exercise of power, as actors compete to define reality in ways that privilege certain interpretations while marginalizing others.

These perspectives suggest that coalitions are not necessarily unified by shared meaning but may be composed of actors aligned in action yet divided in interpretation. While such alignment in action may be sufficient for short-term coordination, deeper divergence in meaning creates instability over time, particularly as movements attempt to scale or institutionalize their goals. Critically, this divergence is not merely a passive condition of diverse audiences—it is shaped by narrative design itself. As narratives become more specific through the assignment of moral responsibility or policy prescriptions, the range of acceptable interpretations narrows, and actors whose interpretations fall outside the emerging consensus may disengage or actively resist.

The coalition ceiling concept builds on but is distinct from several adjacent theoretical frameworks. Schattschneider (1960) argues that political actors strategically expand or contract the scope of conflict to gain advantage—but treats scope as a deliberate strategic choice rather than a structural property of narrative design. Snow and Benford's frame extension process describes techniques for reaching new audiences by adapting frames, but theorizes the mechanisms of expansion without addressing the internal constraints that make expansion structurally costly. Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework (1988) distinguishes between deep core beliefs and secondary beliefs within coalitions, explaining differential resistance to change—but focuses on belief structure within an existing coalition rather than on how a movement's narrative determines who can enter the coalition in the first place. Olson's (1965) selective incentive logic explains non-participation through free-rider dynamics overcome by targeted benefits, but does not account for cases where actors would join if the movement's narrative did not position them as adversaries.

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Rein and Schön (1993) identified frame conflict in policy controversies and proposed frame-reflectiveness as the corrective response, but treated frames as objects of individual and collective awareness rather than as structural determinants of coalition membership. What distinguishes the coalition ceiling concept is its focus on narrative design as the mechanism that simultaneously constitutes the movement's core identity and determines the structural limits of possible membership.

2. Identity, Threat, and Reciprocal Mobilization

The interpretive dynamics described in Section 1 interact with a second set of forces rooted in social identity and motivated cognition. A substantial body of research in political psychology demonstrates that individuals do not evaluate information in a neutral or purely rational manner. Instead, they interpret evidence in ways consistent with their existing values, group affiliations, and social identities. Work on cultural cognition by Kahan (2012) shows that individuals selectively accept or reject information based on whether it affirms or threatens the norms of the groups with which they identify. Research on motivated reasoning demonstrates that corrective information can fail to persuade—and may reinforce prior beliefs—when perceived as identity-threatening (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

These dynamics have roots in foundational social psychology. Festinger's (1957) account of cognitive dissonance establishes that individuals experience psychological discomfort when confronted with information conflicting with their beliefs, leading them to dismiss or reinterpret rather than update. Tajfel and Turner (1979) show that individuals derive a significant portion of their sense of self from group membership, making them particularly sensitive to narratives that challenge the legitimacy or moral standing of their in-group. Moral judgments are often experienced as intuitive and identity-relevant, shaping responses to political arguments in ways that reinforce group alignment (Haidt, 2012). Together, these perspectives establish that narrative reception is structured by identity: messages that affirm group identity are more readily accepted, while those that threaten it are resisted regardless of their empirical validity.

For movements, this creates a systematic asymmetry. Narrative strategies that assign moral responsibility—identifying clear victims and perpetrators—are highly effective at mobilizing core supporters by reinforcing shared identity and moral clarity. However, the same strategies simultaneously activate identity threat among external audiences, particularly those who perceive themselves as implicated in the narrative's assignment of blame. In such cases, resistance is not a failure of communication but a predictable response rooted in identity-protective cognition. The effects are not symmetrical: a narrative experienced as affirming and galvanizing within the core constituency may be experienced as accusatory or delegitimizing by those outside it. These dynamics are amplified in polarized environments, where political and social identities become increasingly aligned, intensifying responses to perceived threat and reducing the range of narratives that can travel across group boundaries without triggering defensive reactions (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018).

The response among those who feel targeted is rarely passive. Actors positioned as responsible for a problem frequently engage in counter-narrative construction: reframing themselves as legitimate contributors, recasting the original protagonists as misguided, biased, or threatening, and mobilizing resources to protect their interests. Competing coalitions do not simply disagree over facts or policy; they produce rival storylines in which roles are inverted and moral responsibility redistributed. This reciprocal narrative formation reinforces identity boundaries and stabilizes opposition over time. Once competing narratives are established, each side interprets the other not as a partner in disagreement but as a source of existential risk to legitimacy, values, or future security.

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This dynamic explains why certain debates harden so quickly. Once both sides are narratively positioned as moral antagonists, the conflict ceases to be about incremental reform. It becomes about preserving dignity and defending legitimacy. Each subsequent action—including actions taken in good faith—is interpreted through the narrative role already assigned. Evidence does not enter a neutral evaluative space; it is filtered through those assignments. Actions taken in good faith are reinterpreted as strategic or self-serving, while opposing claims are discounted as biased or manipulative. Rather than updating beliefs in response to new information, actors assimilate evidence into pre-existing narrative frameworks, reinforcing rather than weakening prior commitments. The standard response—offering additional evidence or argumentation within the same framing—often reinforces opposition rather than reduces it, because it fails to engage the underlying evaluative framework that structures reception.

This tension also operates internally to movements. As organizations seek to broaden their appeal through more inclusive or less confrontational language, core members may perceive such shifts as a dilution of values or a form of moral compromise. Research on group identity and boundary maintenance suggests that such reactions are common: groups actively police the boundaries of acceptable discourse to preserve cohesion and distinctiveness (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Studies of social movements document recurring tensions between maintaining ideological clarity and broadening participation (Freeman, 1972; Polletta, 2006). Accusations that leaders are "selling out" arise not as irrational reactions but as structurally predictable responses to perceived threats to the boundary conditions that define the coalition. Coalition ceilings are therefore shaped by internal boundary maintenance as well as external resistance—the two forces operate simultaneously and reinforce each other.

3. The Coalition Ceiling: Definition, Mechanism, and Dynamics

Framing processes simultaneously enable and constrain alignment; identity-mediated cognition makes narrative reception systematically uneven across groups; and reciprocal narrative formation stabilizes opposition once moral blame has been assigned. These dynamics jointly produce a structural constraint on collective action that has received limited theoretical attention: movements are not only challenged by how to expand their coalitions, but by the limits of how far those coalitions can extend given their own narrative choices.

This paper conceptualizes this constraint as the coalition ceiling—the maximum breadth of actors who can align with a movement's narrative without destabilizing its internal coherence. The ceiling is not simply encountered in the external environment; it is produced endogenously through the narrative choices movements make in constituting their core identity. Narratives that rely on moral distinctions, clear attribution of responsibility, and identifiable antagonists generate strong internal cohesion, but they simultaneously signal to potential allies that participation may require accepting a morally subordinate position or endorsing a framing that implicates their identity or interests. The language that binds the core simultaneously defines the limits of membership.

The coalition ceiling is not a fixed external constraint but an emergent property of narrative design operating through identity-mediated reception and interpretive divergence.

Although the precise location of a coalition ceiling cannot be specified in the abstract, it can be anticipated by examining how a movement's narrative positions actors who have not yet joined. Narratives assign implicit roles to all relevant actors in a contested domain—not only those who support the movement but those who are adjacent, neutral, or opposed. The key prospective indicator is whether potential allies are positioned within the narrative as protagonists, as bystanders, or as part of the problem. Where potential allies are implicitly cast as contributors to the harm the movement identifies—through their professional affiliation, their prior choices, or their institutional role—the identity costs of participation are high and the coalition ceiling is

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correspondingly lower. Where potential allies can see themselves as part of the solution without endorsing a narrative that delegitimizes their identity or implicates their community, the ceiling rises. This distinction makes the coalition ceiling analytically tractable before it is breached rather than visible only in retrospect.

At the center of this mechanism is the role of moral specification. Diagnostic frames that assign responsibility and articulate injustice are widely recognized as central to mobilization (Snow & Benford, 1988; Gamson, 1992), but as Section 2 establishes, such frames also increase the likelihood of identity threat among external audiences (Kahan, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Moral clarity and coalition breadth therefore exist in structural tension. This dynamic relates to research on strategic ambiguity in organizational and political communication: Eisenberg (1984) argues that ambiguity can facilitate coordination among actors with divergent interests by allowing multiple interpretations to coexist, while Edelman (1988) shows how political language sustains broad coalitions by avoiding meanings that would exclude particular groups. As movements move toward greater specificity, this ambiguity becomes harder to sustain and previously latent interpretive differences surface as conflict (Ceccarelli, 1998).

The character of the ceiling can be illustrated through seemingly minor variations in language. Describing a system as "unfair" communicates a clear moral judgment and implies actors responsible for that injustice. While such language resonates strongly with core supporters, it risks triggering identity-protective responses among those who perceive themselves as implicated (Kahan, 2012). Describing the same system as one that has "left too many people behind" preserves the recognition of harm while diffusing direct attribution of blame. The problem has not changed, but the number of actors who can engage with the proposed solution without immediately encountering identity threat has. Such differences are not merely stylistic; they shape the effective boundaries of coalition alignment.

The coalition ceiling is also shaped by forces internal to the movement. As movements seek to broaden their appeal through more inclusive or less morally explicit language, core members may experience such shifts as a loss of clarity, urgency, or moral commitment. Research on group dynamics establishes that groups actively defend the distinctions that define them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Lamont & Molnár, 2002), and social movement scholarship documents tensions between ideological coherence and broadened participation across diverse movement contexts (Freeman, 1972; Polletta, 2006; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Efforts to raise the coalition ceiling by moderating narrative language are therefore resisted from within for structurally predictable reasons—not as failures of leadership or communication, but as boundary maintenance responses among members who experience narrative moderation as a threat to the movement's core identity. The coalition ceiling is often enforced, that is, by those most committed to the movement: the narratives that sustain their identity also limit the terms under which others can be included.

To understand why internal enforcement of the coalition ceiling is so persistent, it is necessary to examine the organizational functions that moral specification serves within a movement. Villain-centered narratives are not adopted arbitrarily or out of simple rhetorical preference. Such narratives perform essential organizational work. A shared opponent anchors the movement's identity; the moral energy such framing generates—indignation, solidarity, urgency—sustains participation over time in ways that more ambiguous narratives typically cannot; and the clarity of who stands outside the coalition provides members with criteria for evaluating potential allies. Removing or moderating the villain does not simply alter a stylistic choice; it removes structural scaffolding through which core members understand who they are and why their participation matters.

This is why efforts to raise the coalition ceiling by moderating narrative language are experienced internally not as strategic adjustment but as identity threat. For core members, the narrative is not merely a communication instrument—it is a constitutive element of the coalition's identity, in the

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sense that Melucci (1996) describes collective identity as an ongoing process through which movements define themselves through the production of shared meaning. When leaders propose adopting more inclusive or less adversarial language, they are not proposing a different way of saying the same thing; they are proposing a different account of who the movement is and what it stands for. Core members who resist such proposals are therefore not acting irrationally—they are defending the narrative architecture that makes their own participation meaningful.

This dynamic also explains a pattern that is puzzling from a purely strategic standpoint: movements frequently maintain narratives that they know are limiting their growth. The organizational incentives of sustained advocacy—the need to maintain donor enthusiasm, sustain volunteer engagement, and signal commitment to existing supporters—all reward the maintenance of high-intensity, morally explicit narratives even when strategic analysis suggests that moderation would expand the coalition. The coalition ceiling is not simply a product of narrative choices made at a movement's founding; it is actively reproduced through the ongoing organizational economy of advocacy itself. This distinguishes the coalition ceiling from accounts that treat narrative as a freely adjustable strategic variable and underscores why coalition expansion so frequently requires not just new messaging but genuine renegotiation of the movement's foundational commitments.

The result is a dual constraint. Externally, narratives face limits on how broadly they can resonate without triggering identity-based resistance. Internally, they face limits on how much they can be adapted without undermining cohesion among core members. The coalition ceiling marks the intersection of these pressures: the point beyond which efforts to expand either provoke internal backlash or fail to gain traction with external audiences. What appears from the outside as a strategic communication problem is, from this perspective, a structural property of how the movement has constituted itself narratively. Disputes over language within movements are not merely rhetorical disagreements but conflicts over the size and composition of the coalition itself. Narrative choices determine not only how issues are understood, but which actors can plausibly participate in collective action.

The coalition ceiling can therefore be understood as the outcome of a causal sequence linking narrative design to coalition limits. Narrative choices—particularly those involving moral specification and the attribution of responsibility—structure how actors are positioned within a story. These positions activate identity-mediated cognitive responses that shape how the narrative is received across groups. Where identity threat is triggered, counter-narratives emerge and stabilize opposition. Together, these processes produce a structural boundary on coalition expansion: the coalition ceiling. This formulation makes the framework falsifiable in two directions: if coalition ceilings are produced by narrative design through these mechanisms, then movements that adopt narratives with lower moral specificity and reduced attribution of blame should exhibit systematically higher coalition breadth over time, controlling for issue salience and material interest alignment. Conversely, those same movements should exhibit lower average intensity of commitment among core members and weaker internal cohesion under pressure, reflecting the structural tradeoff between breadth and depth that the framework predicts. Because narrative and breadth are jointly determined at the aggregate level, the sharper empirical test lies in the signature case identified in Section 4: the potential ally who agrees with the movement's goal and still will not join, whose non-participation traces to the terms of participation rather than the substance of what is being proposed.

4. Analytical Implications: Explaining Persistent Puzzles in Coalition Formation

The coalition ceiling framework offers systematic explanatory leverage on a set of empirical puzzles that existing theories of collective action address only partially. By foregrounding narrative design as a structural constraint on coalition breadth, it accounts for patterns of expansion, stagnation, and fragmentation that are otherwise attributed to resource deficits,

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coordination failures, or hidden divergences in interest—and it generates specific, testable explanations for when and why those patterns should occur.

The first puzzle is the difficulty movements face in scaling beyond an initial base of support even when underlying interests appear broadly aligned. Traditional explanations invoke coordination problems or latent interest divergence. The coalition ceiling framework suggests an additional and distinct mechanism: narratives that achieve high resonance within a core constituency may not travel effectively across groups with different interpretive frameworks (Snow & Benford, 1988; Hall, 1980), not because those groups disagree with the movement's goals, but because the narrative's moral architecture signals that participation requires accepting a position that threatens their identity or implicates their legitimacy. Whereas traditional accounts would attribute stalled expansion to coordination costs or latent preference divergence, the coalition ceiling framework predicts that expansion failure can occur even under conditions of shared material interest, when narrative structure signals identity threat to potential allies. Stalled expansion is not necessarily a failure of outreach; it is a predictable consequence of narrative design. Increasing outreach intensity without adjusting the narrative structure will not resolve it.

A second puzzle concerns why evidence-based communication so frequently fails to persuade—and sometimes intensifies opposition. Research on motivated reasoning and cultural cognition establishes that individuals interpret evidence in identity-consistent ways (Kahan, 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). The coalition ceiling framework deepens this insight by locating the problem not only in the receiver but in the narrative framing within which evidence is presented. Where a communications model would predict that higher-quality or more abundant evidence produces greater persuasion, the coalition ceiling framework predicts the opposite under conditions of elevated narrative blame: additional evidence presented within an attributive frame is interpreted through that frame and narrows rather than expands coalition breadth. When evidence is introduced within frames that assign blame or signal identity threat, it is interpreted through those frames rather than evaluated independently. The problem is not that evidence is absent or audiences are irrational; it is that evidence is always embedded in narratives that structure the boundaries of who can engage with it.

A third puzzle is coalition fragmentation at moments of increased specificity, particularly during transitions from agenda-setting to policy design. Early-stage coalitions frequently sustain themselves through broadly resonant but loosely specified language that allows actors with different underlying interpretations to align provisionally (Eisenberg, 1984; Ceccarelli, 1998). Standard accounts of coalition fragmentation point to revealed interest divergence or bargaining breakdown as movements reach implementation. The coalition ceiling framework predicts a distinct pattern: fragmentation should occur even when underlying interests remain aligned, at precisely the moment when narrative specificity requires actors to commit to a single interpretive framework that was previously left open. As movements shift toward concrete proposals, narratives must specify priorities, assign responsibilities, and define trade-offs. This narrowing of interpretive flexibility exposes latent divergences within the coalition. This dynamic also explains why coalitions organized around shared opposition to a common threat often prove more durable in the short term than coalitions organized around a positive program: negative frames require less specificity, sustaining higher interpretive flexibility and therefore higher coalition ceilings for longer.

A fourth puzzle concerns the instability and reversibility of policy reforms that appear to have achieved success. Standard explanations point to electoral shifts, resource asymmetries between advocates and opponents, or changes in political salience. The coalition ceiling framework adds a further and distinct explanation: reforms achieved through narratives that assign clear moral blame are structurally fragile because they exclude from their supporting coalition the very actors who retain ongoing capacity to obstruct, weaken, or reverse the reform. Whereas resource-based accounts predict reform durability in proportion to advocate organizational capacity, the coalition

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ceiling framework predicts that durability is additionally a function of coalition breadth at the moment of reform—narrow victories achieved through high-blame narratives produce systematically less durable outcomes than broader victories achieved through lower-blame framings, independent of advocate resources. Durable reform requires not only winning the immediate policy contest but building a coalition broad enough that the reform's legitimacy is not fundamentally contested by actors who remain embedded in the system.

A fifth puzzle is why messaging disputes within movements prove so contentious and resistant to resolution through internal deliberation. Framing these disputes as strategic disagreements about tone or emphasis misses their structural character. Organizational accounts would treat such disputes as coordination failures resolvable through improved leadership or clearer communication norms. The coalition ceiling framework predicts instead that these disputes are structurally irresolvable within a given narrative framework, because they reflect genuine conflicts over the location of the ceiling itself—disputes not about style but about which actors can remain in the coalition and on what terms. When core members resist language moderation, they are not simply expressing preferences—they are defending the boundary conditions that define the coalition itself. Any revision of the narrative architecture that raises the external ceiling risks lowering the internal floor, generating backlash among members for whom the existing language performs essential identity functions.

Coalition formation and durability are governed not only by interests and institutions but by the interpretive constraints imposed by narrative choices. The coalition ceiling provides a framework for analyzing those constraints and explains patterns of expansion, stagnation, fragmentation, and reversal that resist interpretation through material or institutional variables alone.

A critical implication concerns the relationship between the coalition ceiling and competing accounts of coalition failure. The most common alternative explanation attributes stalled expansion to preference divergence—potential allies do not join because they disagree with the movement's policy goals, even if they have not stated this disagreement explicitly. The coalition ceiling framework generates a distinct and testable prediction: expansion failure should occur even under conditions of documented preference alignment, when the narrative's moral architecture signals identity threat to potential allies. This distinguishes the two accounts empirically. If movements with demonstrably aligned potential allies routinely fail to recruit them, and if this failure correlates with the moral specificity and blame attribution of the movement's narrative rather than with policy disagreements, then the coalition ceiling framework provides explanatory leverage that preference-based accounts cannot. The signature case for the coalition ceiling is not the potential ally who disagrees with the goal, but the one who agrees with the goal and still will not join—and whose non-participation can be traced to the terms on which participation is offered rather than to the substance of what is being proposed.

5. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This paper has argued that narrative design constitutes a structural determinant of coalition limits. Drawing on framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988; Gamson, 1992; Goffman, 1974), social identity research (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Festinger, 1957; Turner et al., 1987), cultural cognition (Kahan, 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), and interpretive theory (Hall, 1980; Fish, 1980; Ceccarelli, 1998; Eisenberg, 1984), it has introduced the coalition ceiling as a concept that captures the maximum breadth of actors a movement can sustain given its narrative choices. The ceiling is produced endogenously: the language that generates internal cohesion—particularly through moral specification and villain assignment—simultaneously defines the limits of possible membership and activates reciprocal mobilization among those positioned as adversaries.

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The paper makes two contributions to existing literature. First, it extends framing theory by incorporating the mobilization of opposition and the structural limits of alignment as central analytical dynamics rather than secondary effects. While prior research has primarily examined how frames generate resonance and facilitate participation, the coalition ceiling framework shows how the same processes constrain coalition breadth. Second, it integrates social identity dynamics and interpretive theory into coalition formation research, demonstrating that the boundaries of collective action are shaped not only by material interests and institutional conditions but by the interpretive constraints that narrative choices impose on potential participants.

The most important theoretical implication is that coalition ceilings are not externally imposed constraints to be overcome through better strategy. They are produced by the narrative logic that constitutes the movement itself. Expanding a coalition beyond its current ceiling therefore requires not improved messaging within the existing narrative framework but structural adjustment to the narrative—a shift in how the problem is defined, how responsibility is assigned, and how the boundaries of legitimate participation are drawn. Such adjustments carry real costs: they generate internal resistance, may reduce the intensity of commitment among core members, and are frequently experienced as a dilution of the movement's moral foundations. Understanding this as a structural tradeoff rather than a leadership failure is among the framework's core contributions.

The coalition ceiling framework opens a research program with several distinct empirical fronts. The most immediate need is for methods to measure coalition ceilings and track how they shift in response to narrative change. Survey-based experiments could test specific propositions generated by the framework: for example, that narratives employing explicit blame attribution produce lower stated willingness to align among non-affiliated groups controlling for policy agreement; that movements with more morally specified founding narratives show lower coalition breadth five and ten years after founding relative to movements with more structurally framed narratives; or that the introduction of additional evidence within an escalated narrative frame produces greater identity-based resistance than equivalent evidence presented within a non-attributive frame. Corpus analysis of movement communications over time could examine whether shifts toward more inclusive language are associated with internal conflict signals—increases in public dissent, leadership challenges, or membership attrition—consistent with the boundary-maintenance dynamics described in Section 2.

A second direction concerns variation across issue domains and institutional contexts. The dynamics described here may manifest differently depending on the salience of identity, the degree of prior polarization, and the institutional settings in which coalitions operate. Comparative research could examine whether domains characterized by high identity salience—such as immigration or gun regulation—exhibit systematically lower coalition ceilings than domains with lower identity salience, such as infrastructure or public health, and whether this relationship is mediated by the narrative conventions typical of advocacy in those domains.

A third direction involves the temporal dynamics of coalition ceilings. The framework implies that ceilings can shift—but that lowering the ceiling through narrative escalation is likely to be faster and more durable than raising it through narrative moderation, given the asymmetry between identity threat activation and identity threat recovery. Movements that have successfully expanded their coalitions through deliberate narrative change, and those that have attempted but failed, represent important longitudinal cases for testing this proposition.

A fourth direction concerns scope conditions—the domains and movement types in which coalition ceiling dynamics operate with greatest and least force. The framework implies that ceilings will be lower, and harder to raise, in domains characterized by high identity salience, where potential allies are closely affiliated with the actors a movement's narrative positions as responsible for harm. Domains such as immigration enforcement, land use, and gun regulation involve actors whose professional, community, or cultural identities are directly implicated by the

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most common advocacy narratives in those domains. By contrast, in domains with lower identity salience—infrastructure investment, technical standard-setting, or administrative aspects of public health—the costs of coalition participation are lower because potential allies are less likely to experience the narrative as an identity threat. Coalition ceilings should also be lower in movements that have sustained a single narrative architecture over time, as entrenchment produces stronger internal boundary expectations, and higher in movements at early stages of formation before those expectations have crystallized. These scope conditions generate comparative predictions that future research can test across movement types and policy domains (Kriesi et al., 1995).

Finally, the framework has implications for institutional design in multi-stakeholder systems where diverse actors must reach and maintain agreement over time. If narrative design shapes the structural limits of coalition formation, then institutional processes relying on broad-based agreement—standard-setting, regulatory negotiation, multi-stakeholder governance—may benefit from procedural mechanisms that prevent the entrenchment of villain-centered narratives among participating actors. The relationship between institutional design and narrative constraint represents a largely unexplored frontier at the intersection of governance theory and communication scholarship.

More broadly, the coalition ceiling suggests that limits to collective action in contemporary politics may be less a function of irreconcilable interests than of the narrative architectures through which those interests are interpreted and contested. In polarized environments, where identity and meaning are tightly coupled, these narrative constraints become central to understanding both the possibilities and limits of political cooperation. Reforms that fail, coalitions that stall, and debates that harden may often reflect not the absence of shared interest but the presence of narrative architectures that make shared participation structurally untenable.

In emphasizing the structural limits of coalition expansion, the concept of the coalition ceiling does not suggest that broad-based alignment is unattainable. It suggests that such alignment is contingent on how issues are framed, how identities are engaged, and how the boundaries of legitimate participation are drawn and redrawn over time. Narrative does not merely influence coalition formation—it defines its structural limits. The hidden power of narrative lies not only in who it inspires—but in who it activates, and in the structural limits it places on the futures that become possible.

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