Electoral Discourse and the Party Politicization of Sport in Multi-level Systems: Analysis of UK Elections 1945-2011

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Abstract

Mandate and accountability theory state that governments should implement the policies that they promised voters. Accordingly, this study addresses a key lacuna by exploring the role of electoral politics in shaping public policy on sport. Attention centres on issue-salience and policy framing in party manifestos in post-war UK elections. In an era of multi-level governance the analysis also explores the impact of devolution in the UK where, since 1998 sport policy is mandated in four electoral systems in place of earlier, single state-wide ballots. The findings reveal that there has been a sharp increase in issue salience over recent decades – thereby confirming the party politicization of sport as part of the wider rise of 'valence politics'. They also show how parties increasingly frame sport proposals to achieve non-sport aims such as promoting social welfare and boosting international standing. Notably, the data underline the territorialisation of sport policy following the UK's move to quasi-federalism - as policy framing is now contingent on 'regional' socio-historical factors and party politics, including nation-building by civic nationalist parties.

Key Words Sport, Policy Framing, Party Politicization, Issue-Salience, Manifesto, Elections, UK

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Introduction

This paper makes an original contribution by presenting mixed-methods analysis of the issue-salience and policy framing of sport in political parties' manifestos in UK elections 1945-2011. It thus addresses a key lacuna in understanding for, as a survey of the extant literature reveals, in terms of electoral studies, there has been little change since Allison's 1998 (p.709) conclusion that: 'political science lags behind social history and sociological theory in its contributions to the academic understanding of sport'. This is a notable knowledge gap for existing scholarly work underlines how sport has grown in political significance (cf. Green 2006). Furthermore, 'over the past two decades or so, in particular, one consequence of increasing government intervention in sport policy-making has been that sport policy priorities have shifted away from the development of sport and achievement of sport-related goals' (Bloyce and Smith 2010, p.80). Instead, 'governments seek to use it [sport policy] to achieve non-sport policy objectives' (Houlihan *et al* 2009, p.23).

In response, the following analysis examines the rise of sport in post-war UK electoral politics. Specifically, how parties compare in the attention that they afford to sport in their manifesto programmes (or, in the parlance of electoral studies, sport's 'issue-salience') – as well as the language that they use when trying to persuade voters ('policy framing'). In the latter regard, as the following discussion reveals, diverse means are employed. The manifesto discourse variously presents sport policy as: important to economic and social development, a matter of key cultural significance, a means to promote social inclusion, a way of advancing national unity, and integral to the

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provision of social welfare (Cf. Heinemann 2005). On the wider stage it is also framed as an indicator of national pride and a measure of international standing (Cf. Bergsgard *et al* 2007).

The following discussion makes a further original contribution by advancing understanding of how the electoral salience and the framing of sport policy is affected by state-restructuring or devolution. This has international significance for as Rodriguez-Pose and Gill (2003, p. 334) observe, a 'devolutionary trend has swept the world [... involving widespread] transference of power, authority, and resources to subnational levels of government' (Cf. Treisman 2007). Such moves to 'quasi-federalism' (Gamble 2006) have important implications for the way that sport policy develops. Not least because many unitary states are collectivities of different nations and devolution means that policy is no longer exclusively grounded in state-wide elections that reflect the power and priorities of dominant state-wide parties at the federal level. Instead, it is also mandated in meso-ballots where regionalist parties have greater influence and contrasting policy priorities – and where, for example, they may use sport in nation-building and the pursuit of 'regional' autonomy. In the present case constitutional reform in the UK has seen the (re-)creation (circa 1998-9) of national legislatures for Scotland and Wales - and an Assembly for Northern Ireland. Prior to this sport policy was solely mandated in UK general elections.[1] Subsequently, a multi-level system operates such that sport policy proposals are also advanced Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish ballots;[2] a governance shift designed to boost democratic accountability and engage voters with policy that reflects local socio-economic circumstances - as determined by regional-party politics.

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The present focus on electoral discourse is appropriate because manifestos set out parties' political vision for future government (and opposition parties') policy on the role of the state in promoting sporting activity. As Marks *et al* (2007, p. 27) conclude: 'far exceeding expert surveys or any other systematic form of data [they...] convey strategic intentions of political parties, as distinct from their actions'. *Inter alia*, analysis of party programmes reveals the political use of language and discourse-based processes that underpin the development of contemporary sport policy. In this way it is an important indicator of political agenda-setting (Cobb and Ross 1997). Moreover, as Yanow (1999, p. ix) explains, in contrast to traditional analysis of policy implementation, such an approach 'shifts the discussion from values as a set of costs, benefits and choice-points – to a focus on values, beliefs, feelings [and] meanings'. It therefore provides an ideologicially-grounded 'discursive benchmark' to complement traditional instrumental analyses of government policy (Meyers *et al* 1998).

Crucially, focusing on manifesto discourse is apposite owing to its foundational role in democratic systems. This is explained by mandate and accountability theory (Budge and Hofferbert 1990, Royed 1994, Fearon 2003). The former asserts that when in government parties should implement the policies that they promised when running for office. In contrast, accountability theory posits that elections are effectively 'opinion polls' on the performance of the party (or parties) forming the previous administration – and whether they delivered the policy programme on which they were elected (Przeworski *et al*, 1999, Ferejohn 2003). The rise of coalition government in the UK is a further factor underlining the validity of the present attention to electoral discourse. For, whilst the current Westminster coalition government is something of a rarity at a UK level, multi-party executives have become a routine aspect of devolved government

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in the UK and beyond. Electoral discourse thus plays a key role in the construction of coalition governments' programmes as the respective partners seek to merge party-specific election pledges into a single executive policy agenda.

It is against this backdrop that the remainder of the paper is structured thus: a discussion of the literature on the sports policy and electoral competition is followed by an outline of the research methodology. The findings in relation to the study aims are then presented: first in relation to Westminster elections, followed by examination of sport policy in the manifestos for Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish votes. The main findings and their implications are discussed in the conclusion.

Electoral politics and the formative phase of sport policy-making

Existing studies of sport policy and elections have largely been confined to examination of: voting behaviour (Brennan and Buchanan 1984), policy-based attempts to change party image (Janda *et al* 1995), the role of individual party members in advancing sport (Laver 2013); and the electoral fortunes of single-issue 'sports' parties (Allison, Kukhianidze and Matsaberedize 1996). Accordingly, the ensuing discussion addresses a key lacuna by drawing on the electoral theory of 'issue-salience' (RePass 1971, Robertson 1976). This is a conceptualisation whereby importance lies not only in party issue-positions but, crucially, on the prominence and attention afforded to different issues in their campaigns; ergo the more an issue is highlighted by a party (making it 'salient'), the greater the probability it will attract voters who share similar concerns.

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Traditionally, quantitative analysis has been used to explore issue-salience (Libbrecht *et al* 2009, Volkens 2001). The present examination takes a more holistic approach by combining it with an exploration of policy framing. Frames here are 'a necessary property of a text—where text is broadly conceived to include discourses, patterned behaviour, and systems of meaning, policy logics, constitutional principles, and deep cultural narratives' (Creed *et al* 2002, p. 37; see also Fairclough 2000).

In electoral theory sport is a valence issue (Stokes 1962, 1992). In other words, one which generally unites voters (- given its health, recreational and wider social benefits few would argue *against* people playing sport). However, key inter-party differences exist on policy, not least in relation to the role of the state in facilitating sport. *Inter alia*, such dissimilarities are due to contrasting ideological views on the appropriate balance between the market and state (Barnett and Barnett 1997). Traditionally, parties on the Right have embraced neo-liberal, market-based solutions and eschewed state intervention; whilst those of the Left have advocated the harnessing of state power to promote social welfare. In reality party positions are rarely as polarised as this, as evidenced by the literature on welfare pluralism (Beresford and Croft 1983). Underlining this point, over the past two decades, UK politics has been marked by the rise of *valence politics* as the main parties have converged towards the political centre-ground (Bara and Budge 2001, Bromley and Curtice 2002). It is in this context that sport has emerged as a significant policy arena as parties increasingly compete on valence issues. Such competition is captured by the term 'party politicization'. This refers to the process by which an issue develops to be electorally salient, thereby rising up the political agenda and becoming the subject of politicking as rival parties seek voters' support at the ballot box (Converse and Dupeux 1962, Mayntz

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and Derlien 1989, Carter 2006). Issue-salience is the principal indicator used to assess such competition and refers to the importance of an issue for a given party in a particular election as indicated by the number of associated policy proposals (cf. Roberts *et al* 2002, Selck 2007).

Methodology

By applying mixed research methods the current study heeds earlier calls for policy work to combine content and critical discourse analysis (Tonkiss 2004). Accordingly, issue-salience is determined by content analysis of manifestos. This is applied by logging the number of incidences of key words, ideas or meanings in party programmes (Topf 1994, Krippendorff and Bock 2008) and is complemented by frame analysis (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, Schön and Rein 1994). The latter is concerned with how, as political texts, manifestos enable parties to construct (or 'frame') policy proposals on sport and other matters. In electoral terms, as Nelson and Oxleya (1997, p. 75) observe: 'frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts and other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame'. In this way framing leads to political agenda-setting (Cohen 1963, Cobb and Ross 1997) and, ultimately, the substantive policies that are mandated.

Comparative analysis of framing practices in different polities and tiers of government is an established methodological practice (De Vreese *et al* 2001, Papacharissi 2008). Notwithstanding this, it is germane to reflect upon the

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appropriateness and robustness of such a method. A key potential criticism acknowledged here is that policy discourse does not always translate into action and outcomes. However, our aim here is not to focus on outcomes but to examine the formative stage of policy-making thereby complementing existing instrumental policy studies that, *inter alia*, attempt to measure policy impact (Caracelli and Greene 1993, Ivankova 2011). This on-going, *ex ante* processual perspective has explanatory power that complements traditional *ex post* policy analysis. Its emphasis is on policy documents as anticipatory statements of state action. These provide a discursive benchmark against which to assess outcomes – and crucially, they reveal how the sport policy is envisioned. They also offer insight into differences of approach, debates and ideology across territories.

The data analysis was operationalised as follows. Electronic versions of the manifestos of the leading[3] parties in UK general and regional elections 1945-2011 were analysed using appropriate software.[4] Thus, in the preliminary stage of the research, the manifesto texts were divided into 'quasi-sentences' (or, 'an argument which is the verbal expression of one political idea or issue,' Volkens 2001, p. 96). Dividing the text in this manner controlled for long sentences that contain multiple policy proposals.[5] Individual quasi-sentences were subsequently coded using a deductive coding frame (Boyatzis 1998, Joffe and Yardley 2003) that captured key themes related to sport policy (See Figure 5.). This schema incorporates a range of frames including: effective sports governance, widening participation, the pursuit of excellence, and international standing/ the political vision of the nation. In order to increase data reliability the coding was done twice, first by the authors and again by a research assistant. Divergent views emerged in <2 per cent of quasi-sentences (N=1,676)[6] (resolved by discussion

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between coders). Issue-salience was then determined by logging the frequency of quasi-sentences in a database of party manifestos 1945-2011.

As existing electoral studies reveal, over recent years party programmes have tended to become more detailed and have a greater word-length. This has potential methodological implications for any claims made about changes in salience over time; not least because it might be regarded as a function of increased manifesto length rather than greater attention to sport policy by the respective parties. To control for this, the present analysis uses both 'absolute' and 'relative totals' methodologies. The former details the total number of quasi-sentences on the sport; whilst the latter recalculates them as a percentage of all quasi-sentences in each manifesto[7] (i.e. on all topics and issues; see Figure 2. – below). Because the impact of increased manifesto word length on saliency is complex and variable[8] both approaches have advantages and shortcomings. For example, notwithstanding the overall trend towards greater manifesto length, there are major fluctuations in both manifesto word totals and the number of quasi-sentences (in seven of the 18 general election cycles studied here the total number of quasi-sentences in the manifestos studies actually *de*creased compared to the preceding ballot). Nevertheless, in order to increase reliability and to control for any discrepancies between the two methods, both were used in the following analysis. This dual approach affirmed that the 'absolute totals' method (i.e. exploring the changing totals of sport quasi-sentences) produced findings consistent with those derived from the 'relative proportion' method (thus, for example, they both reveal a significant increase in the issue salience of sport over time, see Figures 1 and 2).

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Westminster elections 1945-2010

The present data show that in the first post-war elections sport had markedly low issue-salience. Instead, the emphasis was on national recovery and building the new institutions of the welfare state. Early references are often non-specific in nature; typified by, 'national and local authorities should co-operate to enable people to enjoy their leisure to the full, to have opportunities for healthy recreation' (Labour Party 1945, p.7); or, they are centred on compulsory-phase education (e.g. 'playing-fields and opportunities for organised games should be normally provided in all schools', Liberal Party 1945, p.8). Specific pledges on sport emerge in the 1950s. For example, 'we shall provide more playing fields. We shall abolish the tax on sport' (Labour Party 1955, p.8); and 'measures will be taken to encourage youth leadership and the provision of attractive youth clubs, more playing fields and better facilities for sport' (Conservative Party 1959, p. 14). Just 4.9 per cent of post-war manifesto references to sport were made in elections prior to 1964.

[Temporary Note – Figures 1 and 2 – about here]

Subsequently, from 1966 onwards, there is a significant increase in salience. This is confirmed when the absolute totals of the parties' sport references are plotted (Figure 1), and when sport pledges are shown as a percentage of all quasi-sentences (i.e. made by the parties on all topics and issues in a given election) (Figure 2). Data derived from both methods confirm the sharp post-war rise in issue salience: 3.2 per cent of

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references were made in the 1960s and 4.9 per cent in the 1970s. Yet the greatest increase comes in the wake of enduring concerns in the 1980s about a range of issues including young people's health and a dearth of national success in elite sport (cf. Evans *et al* 1993, Flintoff 2003). In consequence, 9.5 per cent of references are made in the 1980s, 17.6 in the 1990s, 39.3 in the 2000s, and 20.6 per cent in the 2010 election.[9]

[Temporary Note – Figure 3 - about here]

Over the post-war period there are statistically-significant inter-party differences in issue-salience. It is the parties of the Left that predominate, together accounting for almost two-thirds of sport references in the manifestos: Labour contribute the majority of pledges (56.8 per cent the 1945-2010 total) and the Liberals/ Liberal Democrats make 13.1 per cent. In contrast, the Conservatives are responsible for under a third (30.1 per cent). The party politicization of sport is evident when the number of references made by the two main parties is compared over election cycles. This shows that in almost two-thirds (61.1 per cent) of cases an increase in sport salience over the previous ballot in Labour Party manifestos was matched by a corresponding election-on-election increase in Conservative manifestos.[10]

Crucially, the following analysis of the language of sport in the post-war manifestos reveals another key aspect of the discourse; namely, statistically significant party differences policy framing. Notably the data confirm the Left-Right split. In turn,

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this is explained by the Left's greater emphasis on sport as social policy (Cf. Polley 1998); in other words, Labour and the Liberals/ Liberal Democrats' greater propensity to use sport to promote social well-being in areas like health, education and tackling social exclusion. In contrast, the Conservative Party has traditionally been wary of interventionist measures by the state and generally more disposed to *laissez faire* governance. However, the data reveal exceptions and subtleties to this pattern, most notably in the manifestos of New Labour and its neo-liberal approach to governing.

When the data are disaggregated analysis shows 'government funding/ support for sport' to be the first-ranked frame of the post-war period. Labour account for just over a half of references (52.4 per cent), the Conservatives just over a third (34.1per cent) and Liberals/ Liberal Democrats (13.5 per cent) (P=<0.001).[11] Examples of Labour's discourse include: 'we shall make much better provision for the enjoyment of sport, the arts and the countryside. A Sports Council will be set up with a grant of £5 million' (Labour Party 1959, p.4). In contrast, the Conservative discourse under this frame pays greater attention to funding sources that are not reliant on direct taxation. For example, 'we will encourage the flow of private funds to charities including voluntary social service, sport and the arts' (Conservative Party 1970, p.8) and, we will be 'encouraging private investment in grassroots sport' (Conservative Party 2001, p.28). The discourse also makes extensive reference to the Conservative Party's innovation in funding: 'we believe that the funds generated by a National Lottery should be used to enhance the life of our nation. People who enjoy the arts, sport, Britain's heritage and fine countryside could all benefit from the proceeds from a National Lottery' (Conservative Party 1992, p.31). As noted, the discourse also reveals Labour's post-1992 neo-liberal turn whereby the Party places emphasis on non-state funding and

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provision. For example, 'we will develop a National Sports Foundation to bring resources from the private and voluntary sectors together with public money to invest in grassroots sporting facilities' (Labour Party 2005, p.37).

Tropes form part of political discourse and cross-cut policy frames. As Fischer and Forrester (1993, p. 117) explain, they are 'figures of speech and argument that give persuasive power to larger narratives [including policy frames] of which they are part'. Overall, the main tropes crosscutting the parties' discourse under the funding frame are: 'modernisation' (Conservative Party 2010, p. 44), being 'in tune with people's priorities' (Labour Party 2010, p. 53); 'restoring and developing' (Liberal Democrats 2001, p.17); 'investment' (Conservative Party 1997, p.32); and 'endowment' (Labour Party 1992, p.19).

Allied to the foregoing, Labour also predominate in the discourse under the 'improving facilities/ staffing' frame. The Party again accounts for over a half of references (52.9 per cent), compared to just under a third (30.4 per cent) by the Conservatives and 17.4 per cent by the Liberals/ Liberal Democrats (P=<0.05). For example, 'Labour's National Sports Council and the nine Regional Sports Councils are developing facilities and identifying recreational needs in sport... [delivering] multi-purpose sports centres for the adult community...' (Labour Party 1970, p.17); 'by 2008 our aim is that almost everyone will be within 20 minutes of a good multi-sport facility' (Labour Party 2005, p. 45); and 'we will invest in a new national network of school sports coaches to increase the quality and quantity of coaching in some of the most deprived areas (Labour Party 2010, p. 61).

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Sport in state education is a policy frame that spans the second half of the twentieth century and on into the new millennium (cf. Wallhead and O'Sullivan 2005, Hastie, de Ojeda and Luquin 2011). The data again reveal party contrasts and show that Labour predominates in the use of this frame (accounting for 59.6 per cent of post-war pledges) – thereby reflecting its greater use of sport as social policy (Holt and Mason 2000). In contrast, the Conservatives are responsible for just over a quarter of quasi-sentences (28.3 per cent) and the Liberals/Liberal Democrats 12.1 per cent (P=<0.001).[12] However, sole reliance on the parties' relative share of the discourse under this frame underplays the party politicization witnessed over the past five election cycles. This is particularly evident in the discourse on the school curriculum. For example: 'under the National Curriculum all primary and secondary age pupils will follow a course of PE [physical education]' (Conservative Party 1992, p.18); we shall 'ensure that sport takes its proper place within the curriculum' (Labour Party 1992, p.29); 'our simpler minimum curriculum entitlement replacing the national curriculum will allow greater provision of sport and physical education in schools' (Liberal Democrats 2001; 39); and 'under Labour, sport has been squeezed out of the curriculum and child obesity has risen alarmingly' (Conservative Party 2005, p. 9). Pledges under the 'education' frame are advanced in the context of a number of tropes , including: 'competition' (e.g. 'every child should have the chance to compete at school', Labour Party 2005, p. 51); 'skills for life, such as healthy living, being part of a team and respecting others' (Conservative Party 2005, p.27); 'foster[ing] local and national pride' (Liberal Democrats 2001, p.18); 'entitlement' (Labour Party 2001, p.35); and 'the pursuit of excellence' (Conservative Party 1987, p.24).

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Labour account for almost two-thirds (64.8 per cent) of references under the 'effective sports governance' frame. In contrast, the Conservatives are responsible for just over a fifth (22.2 per cent) and Liberals/ Liberal Democrats 13 per cent ($P=$ <0.05).[13] Pledges under this frame are principally advanced in the context of: 'transparency' and 'accountability' (e.g. Labour Party 2010, p.48). In addition, the discourse emphasises 'independence from government' and 'engagement'. Examples of the latter include references to 'extending community involvement' (Labour Party 2001, p.19); and 'we will look to streamline the over-complex funding structures for sport, reducing the number of quangos and devolving more funds to a more rationalised network of governing bodies' (Conservative Party 2001, p. 39). Notwithstanding the latter entreaties, as Green (2009, p. 121) cogently observes: 'under current and emerging governance arrangements in the UK, an illusory screen of plural, autonomous and empowered delivery networks for sport obscures the very close ties to, and regulation from, the centre'. The manifesto discourse reveals the party politicization of this issue. For example:

> Freeing our culture from political interference. The last Conservative Government transformed the funding of sport… by creating the National Lottery. We ensured that money from this source was additional to Government spending, and administered independently. Labour have increasingly taken control of Lottery funds. The rules which govern applications for Lottery funds are excessively complex. We will reform them, so that they are more accessible to small community groups (Conservative Party 2001, p.41).

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Labour's predominance under the 'widening participation' frame (cf. Giles-Corti 2002, Kahma, 2010, Moens and Scheerder 2005) reflects the Party's pre-New Labour emphasis on universal welfare entitlement. Thus, notwithstanding its neo-liberalism in the 1990s and 2000s, Labour accounts for almost two-thirds (64.3 per cent) of references compared to just over a quarter by the Conservatives (26.2 per cent) and 9.5 per cent by the Liberals/ Liberal Democrats (P =<0.001).[14] Examples include: 'we will nourish special talents and encourage wider participation in sport' (Labour Party 1987, p.42) and, 'we believe that grassroots sport is just as important. We will give people from all backgrounds and generations the opportunity to participate in sports' (Liberal Democrats 2011, p.49).

In contrast, the Conservatives account for most references (45.7 per cent) under the 'pursuit of excellence' frame. In turn, Labour is responsible for 40 per cent, and Liberals/ Liberal Democrats 14.3 per cent.[15] Examples include, 'a more prosperous Britain can afford to be ambitious. We can aspire to excellence in… sport' (Conservative Party 1992, p.18); and 'we will ensure that our elite athletes get the funding they need to achieve excellence in the future' (Conservative Party 2001, p.33).

Labour make most references under the 'international standing/ vision of nation' frame (58.3 per cent), followed by the Conservatives (33.3 per cent), and Liberals/ Liberal Democrats (8.3 per cent) (P= <0.05).[16] Examples include: 'new facilities and better backing for people with outstanding talent will help put Britain back on the international sporting map' (Labour Party 1992, p.35); and 'the next stage of national renewal - A golden decade of sport' (Labour Party 2011, p.38). Tropes under the frame allude to the notion of a 'confident nation' (Conservative Party 1997, p.17); 'national pride' (Conservative Party 1992, p.31); sport as 'nourishment for our imagination or a

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source of plain enjoyment' (Labour Party 2005, p.42); and 'a showcase of British excellence' (Conservative Party 1997, p. 33).

The data reveal that the Labour Party accounts for most (53.8 per cent) of references under the 'social inclusion/ community benefits' frame. In contrast, the Conservatives and Liberals/ Liberal Democrats both account for 38.5 per cent.[17] This aspect of the discourse underlines continuity between New Labour's Third Way discourse (1997-2010) (Levitas 2005) and the 'Big Society' rhetoric of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-15) (Sage 2012). Both emphasize active citizenship in ways consonant with the literature on social capital (Putnam 1993). Here the argument runs that volunteering and engagement in sport strengthens social bonds, networks and reciprocity. Across parties, explication of how exactly how these processes – or modes of 'capital', can be applied to tackling social exclusion through volunteering in sport is often vague or lacking. Earlier examples of the discourse include: 'to build on the renaissance that British sport... ha[s] enjoyed in the last decade in the new climate of financial restraint. The voluntary and community sector has a new lease of life, but needs its potential to be fully harnessed' (Labour Party 2010, p.27); 'sport[s] are thriving around Britain – enriching individual lives and transforming communities' (Labour Party 2005, p.29); 'sport is... a good way of building communities' (Labour Party 2001, p.22); and 'we will give incentives to voluntary bodies to involve themselves more widely in the provision of sporting and community facilities' (Labour Party 1983, p.47).

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However, as Morgan (2013, p. 390) observes, such discourse can be viewed as little more than rhetorical cover for an underlying concern with 'fiscal constraint and identifying alternatives to balance the 'shortfall' of public provision'. Examples include: 'the Big Lottery Fund will focus purely on supporting social action through the voluntary and community sector… sports… will each see [its] original allocation of 20 per cent of good cause money restored' (Conservative Party 2010, p.53); and 'improving grass roots and community sport. We will support volunteer sports organisers by sweeping away the unnecessary bureaucracy that is deterring volunteers' (Conservative Party 2010a, p.2). Accordingly, such an approach has inherent challenges and contradictions. As Nichols *et al* (2013, p.91) observe: 'the role of the state in supporting civic activism needs to strike a very careful balance between reducing involvement in some areas and increasing it in others…. There is a paradox between on the one hand trying to increase volunteering and on the other, increasing pressures on volunteers through cuts in public expenditure and increasing regulatory burdens'.

The post-war data also reveal how framing state sport policy in the context of health is a long-established aspect of the discourse. In this regard, the parties of the Left predominate in advancing pledges concerned with social policies to harness the power of the state to promote well-being. Labour account for almost a half of the references (48.8 per cent), and the Liberals/ Liberal Democrats 13.7 per cent; whilst the Conservatives are responsible for just over one third (37.5 per cent) (P=<0.05).[18] Examples include: 'many parents will be able to choose the school they like and to play their part with the educational authorities in the physical and spiritual well-being of their children' (Conservative Party 1945, p.6); 'participation in sport raises levels of fitness and health, and helps to foster local and national pride. We will promote

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Community Sports Plans' (Liberal Democrats 2001, p.18); and, 'sport is a good health policy,' (Labour Party 2001, p.22).

Notwithstanding the development of anti-discrimination legislation over the past four decades (Fredman 2001, Long *et al* 2005), analysis reveals only a handful of manifesto references to promoting equality in sport. Of these, Labour account for two-thirds with the remainder by the Conservatives. Examples include, 'Sport - Together with £155 million from the Big Lottery Fund, the Government will ensure that ... those with a disability have much better access to safe, modern playgrounds' (Labour Party 2005, p.41).

The present findings are also significant in relation to the concept of 'issue ownership'. Electoral theory (Petrocik 1996) explains how this aspect of party politicization focuses on discursive politics and the way parties prioritize certain policy issues, emphasize earlier successes and attempt to highlight their competence on a given topic whilst at the same time dismissing rivals' records. The underlying motive here is to be seen as the 'owners' of an issue – thereby securing electoral and reputational advantage. Textual analysis reveals that, in addition to party contrasts in issue salience and framing, politicking to secure issue ownership is a further dimension of the party politicization of sport seen in UK electoral politics over recent decades. Examples include: 'the choice is forward with New Labour to more sport in schools... Or back to the Tories and cuts of £207 million across culture, arts and sport (Labour Party 2005, p. 19); 'the Tories have always neglected the arts and sport, regarding them as an easy target for cuts (Labour Party 2010, p.47); and 'government policy towards the arts, sports and broadcasting has stumbled from fiasco to disaster in the last four years (Conservative Party 2001, p.29).

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Meso elections 1998-2011

The meso-election data show that when the 1998/9 and 2011 ballots are compared, there has been a fivefold increase in the issue-salience of sport in 'regional' electoral politics.[19] A further striking indication of this 'step-change' in salience is the fact that, in little over a decade, more than twice as many references were made in the meso-elections 1998-2011 than in all 18 post-war UK general elections (N=494 compared to N=1,182).[20]

[Temporary Note – Figure 4. – about here]

This increase has been accompanied by the territorialisation of policy; in other words, contrasting policies in the constituent polities of the UK. It is a contingent process shaped by the interplay of three non-discrete factors: 1. local socio-economic conditions; 2. devolved party politics - (*inter alia*, voting patterns, the number and ideological orientation of parties); and 3. institutional arrangements - (e.g. the constitutional powers of devolved governments and legislatures; and the type of electoral system and its influence on the election of smaller parties etc.). The result is spatial variation in the level of attention, or priority, afforded to sport across polities. In the present case it is evidenced by statistically-significant differences in the total number of sport quasi-sentences in the post 1998/9 electoral discourse (P=<0.001).[21] Such contrasts are important because they are part of a new dynamic in the formative

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phase of sport policy making and they shape policy outcomes; not least because devolution has afforded regionalist parties unprecedented policy influence. This is a key discontinuity with the pre-1998 situation. It is evidenced by the fact that following the UK's move to quasi-federalism all six of the 'regionalist' parties considered here (SNP, Plaid Cymru, DUP, UUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin) have held government office.

When the 'devolved' total of manifesto references to sport is analysed most were made in Scotland (58.8 per cent), followed by Wales (27.9 per cent) and Northern Ireland (13.3 per cent) (Figure 4). In part, the predominance of Scotland and Wales reflects the distinct socio-political histories of each territory and the fact that each has an extended record of participating in international competitions. In contrast, Northern Ireland's history is more complex and shaped by civil conflict. The higher number of references in Scotland compared to Wales is explained by the latter's incorporation into a significant number of pre-1999 'England and Wales' cross-border sport decision-making and governance structures.

Spatial variation in the formative phase of sport policy-making is confirmed by statistically significant differences in the framing profiles of each polity (Figure 4.) (P=<0.001).[22] These contrasts in language use underline the way that manifesto discourse is a starting point in territorial policy divergence and (re-)definition of sport's relationship with the state.

[Temporary note – Figure 5 – about here]

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Accordingly, advancing sport in education is the first-ranked frame in Scotland (accounting for 18.4 per cent of post-1998 manifesto references to sport in devolved elections in the polity). It also has high salience in Wales (where it is second-ranked; accounting for 15.8 per cent of references). Yet it is sixth-placed in Northern Ireland (8.9 per cent of manifesto references). Sport's status as a policy issue in Scottish elections is underpinned by the electoral competition between the governing SNP administration and opposition Scottish Labour Party; typified in the 2011 election when particular attention centred on access to school premises and the curriculum. For example, 'we will… open up the school estate over and above regular hours and, in doing so, deliver more sporting opportunities for children as well as the wider community' (SNP 2011, p. 31); and, 'we will improve access to both school and community sports facilities and other clubs outwith the school day' (Scottish Labour Party 2011, p. 31).

Framing sport public policy proposals in terms of health received greatest attention in Wales (19.7 per cent of all post-1999 sport manifesto references). This reflects local policy prioritization in order to address comparatively high levels of morbidity and mortality in the polity (Musingarimi 2009). In contrast, it is fourth-ranked in Northern Ireland (10 per cent of references), and seventh–ranked in Scotland (7.2 per cent of references). The Welsh discourse reflects the governing Labour Party's espousal of universalism and rejection of means-tested welfare (Cheney and Drakeford 2004); part of its self-styled 'classic Labour' socialist ideology designed to distance it

from the neo-liberalism of the Party in Westminster. As Harrington *et al*, (2009, p.38) observe, in contrast to the targets-driven approach in England and Northern Ireland, government policy in Wales has seen the policy goal of 'extending the sport and physical activity experiences introduced in school outside of school programmes to foster continued participation in the community and away from the school'. Prominent examples of the latter approach are the commitments that: 'in the next Welsh Assembly term Labour will: enable free access to local authority swimming pools for older people' (Welsh Labour Party 2003, p.22); and 'we will build on the success of the free swimming initiative, for example by providing opportunities for children in Wales to swim free in local council pools on the weekends' (Welsh Labour Party 2007, p.7).

When the devolved polities are compared, use of sport policy to set out parties' normative vision of the nation and its international standing has greatest relative importance in Wales where it is the second-ranked frame (14.8 per cent of all sport references); whilst in Scotland it is third-ranked (13.8 per cent of all sport references in Scotland). Reflecting the contrasting constitutional dynamics in Northern Ireland it is the sixth placed frame (5.8 per cent of all sport references).

As Houlihan (1997, p. 114) notes, sport may 'aid the state and achieve its objectives of legitimacy, territorial integrity, and citizen commitment [... for it] possesses a powerful symbolism that can be exploited on occasion to great effect'. It is a point supported by Bairner (2001, p. 46) who observes: 'no analysis of sport in Scotland would be complete without some reference to Scottish society and politics in general and specifically to the question of national identity'. He continues, 'the problem is that

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this can often lead to large unsubstantiated claims concerning sport and Scottish nationality' (*op cit* 2001, p.46). In response, the present data are significant in that they do substantiate how nationalist parties emphasize sport as part of a wider concern with nation building (cf. Kpessa and Lecours 2011, Jarvie 2006). In the case of Scotland the SNP made the majority of references (64.8 per cent) under this frame; almost double the number made by its rival, the Scottish Labour Party. Likewise in Wales, Plaid Cymru account for the majority of references (58 per cent); whilst the SDLP and Sinn Féin were responsible for most references in Northern Ireland (54 per cent). In the nationalist parties' manifestos sport is used to emphasize the SNP's and Plaid Cymru's goal of independence for Scotland and Wales, as well as their desire for wider international recognition of nationhood. For example, 'sport can play a role in... raising Wales' profile on the international stage... we will seek opportunities to ensure that Wales has national teams in as many sports as possible' (Plaid Cymru 2011, p. 33); we will 'give the maximum number of Scottish athletes the opportunity to compete on the international stage and assist in developing sport throughout Scotland' (SNP 2007, p. 46); and, 'we will raise the prominence of sport... The foundations of this policy will be delivering sporting success to boost Wales internationally' (Plaid Cymru 2003, p. 42). In contrast, in the case of Northern Ireland, nationalist parties' manifesto discourse is not concerned with independence but union with another EU state, namely Ireland. This too is reflected in the manifesto references to sport. For example, 'sport in cross-border areas - To assist and support cultural and sporting activities in border areas, we will work with our Southern counterparts, particularly at local council level, and give practical consideration to a more joined-up approach' (SDLP 2011, p. 41).

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Issues of identity are also played out in the sport pledges of unionist parties' manifestos. In the case of the Labour Party in Scotland and Wales, it simultaneously advances a civic nationalist discourse designed to appeal to Scottish and Welsh voters; yet at the same time emphasises Britishness and support for the union state. Examples of the former include 'sport is an integral part of Scottish life and culture… Scottish Labour will designate [2007] the Scottish Year of Sport, investing to ensure the widest participation so that all of Scotland gets the most out of it' (Scottish Labour Party 2007, p. 28); and we will secure 'the best for Wales - sport plays a vital part in our national life' (Welsh Labour Party 1999, p.8). In contrast, examples of the British-oriented discourse include: 'the Union has served us well… The best future for Scotland lies in us building up Scotland not breaking up Britain' (Scottish Labour 2011, p.97); 'sport is a national passion in Britain. It binds us together, and is part of the lifeblood of urban and rural communities across our country' (Labour Party 2010b, p.3); and 'Britain has some of the best athletes and sports teams in the world, so it is no surprise that sport plays such a big role in our national life' (Conservative Party 2010b, p.1).

The civil conflict in Northern Ireland provides a further key example of how the electoral politics of sport under quasi-federalism can lead to policy divergence. Accordingly, the 'community benefits' of sport is the first-ranked frame in the province. It is used to emphasise sport's power to bridge sectarian divisions. The SDLP predominates in its use (accounting for 60 per cent of references). Examples include, we will 'co-ordinate cross-community activity for the young, providing opportunities for integration and cooperation between schools, community groups, youth clubs and amateur sport teams' (SDLP 2007, p.21).

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Allied to the foregoing, Northern Ireland manifestos also give greater priority to the promotion of equality in sport. It is the fifth-ranked frame (compared to eighth and tenth in Wales and Scotland, respectively). In this respect the discourse reflects Right-of-centre parties' traditional *laissez faire* orientation and reluctant embrace of state intervention on equalities matters (Cf. Fraser 1996); for 87 per cent of equalities-related pledges were in the manifestos of Left-of-centre parties. Particular attention is given to equality and religious affiliation. For example, 'equality and inclusion are at the core of our values, and we recognise the role sport and leisure have to play in making these our reality ... [we will] co-ordinate cross-community activity for the young, providing opportunities for integration and cooperation between amateur sport teams' (SDLP 2007, p. 18). Sport as a means to tackle sectarianism is also a key aspect of promoting equality in Scottish manifestos. For example, 'religious hatred, violence, prejudice and discrimination are wrong. It fills too many of our people with bitterness and it causes too many too much pain. Sectarianism and racism demean Scotland and Scottish Labour will work to defeat them. Scottish Labour will work with sporting clubs and schools to defeat it' (Scottish Labour Party 2003, p.28). In contrast, in Wales particular emphasis is placed on gender equality. For example, 'we will design a sports curriculum to increase participation from girls and promote women in sport at all levels' (Welsh Labour Party 2003, p.16).

The territorialisation of sports policy is not only driven by the prescriptions of regionalist parties. It is also advanced by *intra*-party differences in state-wide parties in relation to both issue-salience and framing (P=<0.05); in other words divergent practice between UK and 'regional' divisions of the same party (e.g. between UK Labour and

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Scottish Labour).[23] As Laffin *et al* observe (2007, p.88) this has emerged from rapid and far-reaching institutional change in the parties:

> British Labour remains formally a unitary party despite devolution. Nonetheless, the national party leadership has allowed the Scottish and Welsh Labour Parties considerable freedom, in practice, to… conduct regional-level elections and implement some distinctive policies. [The] parties have shifted significantly from being traditional, centralized parties.

Thus, for example, Scottish Labour promised, 'we will work towards two hours of quality PE in every school, adopting creative ways to engage both boys and girls in sports activities' (Scottish Labour Party 2011, p.30). Whereas Welsh Labour promised 'enabling children and young people to have access to undertake at least five hours of sporting activity every week' (Welsh Labour Party 2011, p.106). In the case of the Scottish Conservatives (1999, p. 14), they promised, 'we would use Lottery money to fund schemes for staff and parents in all primary and secondary schools in Scotland to enable them to coach school teams and individual pupils in a variety of sports', whereas the Welsh Conservatives made no such pledge. Instead, they stated: 'we would introduce a National Scholarship for talented children to attend private sector schools which have established a reputation for excellence in sport' (Conservative Party 1999, p.15). In turn, this is a commitment unmatched by the Scottish Conservatives.

Discussion

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The present findings reveal how the past three decades have seen a significant growth in the issue-salience of sport in the electoral discourse of the main state-wide parties in Westminster elections. Overall, the parties of the Left account for the majority of pledges on sport. Moreover, inter-party comparison of issue salience over post-war election cycles reveals that, in the majority of cases, election-on-election increases in the salience of sport in Labour manifestos are mirrored by increased attention in Conservative Party manifestos. This, and the steep cross-party rise in salience, confirms the party politicization of sport in the last decades of the twentieth century. The data also show how this has continued apace in the new millennium, suggesting that sport is integral to the rise of valence politics in the UK.

The analysis of policy framing in general election manifestos reveals parties' contrasting use of language as they seek voters' support at the ballot box. In turn, while framing data confirm a general Left-Right split, they also show how electoral discourse on sport reflects shifting party ideologies; notably, Labour's move away from its earlier exclusive emphasis on state support for sport to the advancement of a 'mixed-economy' approach, whereby state provision is complemented by input from voluntary and private sector organizations. This neo-liberal 'turn' underpins similarities in the framing of Labour's 'Third Way' manifesto discourse with the 'Big Society' rhetoric of the current Conservative-led coalition government; most notably in relation to sport's role in tacking social exclusion and securing wider community benefits.

The present analysis also reveals how state restructuring and quasi-federalism impacts on sport leading to the territorialisation of policy. In contrast to pre-1998 practices (when the formative phase of sport policy-making was grounded in single state-wide elections), it now originates in the multi-level system created by devolution.

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As a result, policy is mandated in four territorially-distinct political systems (*inter alia*, each with contrasting electoral arrangements, party politics, and dominant ideologies). Accordingly, the data show how policy framing is shaped by territorial politics as well as being contingent on local socio-historical factors (evidenced by, for example, the emphasis on social inclusion/ community benefits in Northern Ireland, and sectarianism in Scotland).

Strikingly, policy divergence is also driven by intra-party variation in framing by the three main UK state-wide parties. The foregoing analysis shows how they advance contrasting pledges in different polities. A further significant driver of divergence is civic nationalist parties' use of sport policy as part of their wider nation-building agenda in Wales and Scotland. With increasing legislative powers, taxation and policy responsibilities being transferred from Westminster to the regional governments and legislatures, sport policy divergence in the UK is likely to deepen and gather pace over future years.

It is in this context that the present analysis suggests a future research agenda that builds on the current study and explores: 1. the effect of lobbying and public attitudes data in determining the nature of sport policy pledges in party election programmes; 2. the intra-party processes of agenda-setting associated with sport in party election manifestos, including the role of individual political actors; and 3. the influence of sport policy pledges on voting behaviour.

Overall, the current study contributes to international sport politics scholarship in a number of regards. It underlines the process of mandate-seeking in the formative phase of policy-making and thus the democratic origins of sport policy. Moreover, it

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shows how this is a discursive process whereby parties compete through contrasting use of language in an attempt to persuade voters, and in turn, how framing reflects distinctive party values and ideologies – as well as parties' increasing articulation of sports policy to achieve non-sport policy outcomes. It also indicates that sport is part of the wider rise of valence politics witnessed over the past three decades. Lastly, it underlines the need for contemporary study of sport policy to be cognizant of state restructuring and associated electoral processes of multi-level systems whereby the relationship between sport and the state is being (re-)defined through the practices and processes of contemporary politics and governance.

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[1] With the exception of 1945-72 elections to the Northern Ireland Parliament.

[2] This does not deny the nation status of Scotland and Wales. Regions' may – or may not, be co-terminous with nation-states. Accordingly, this study follows existing practice by using the umbrella term 'regional' to denote sub-unitary state nations and provinces (Cf. Danson and de Souza 2012).

[3] Defined in terms of share of the popular vote.

[4] Where necessary, hardcopy only versions of early manifestos were transcribed. The software used was Nvivo 9.

[5] For example, the statement 'we will introduce further funding for community sporting facilities along with personal fitness trainers for those referred by their GP' – would be coded once under the 'community benefits' frame and once under the 'health' frame.

[6] 15 incidences.

[7] Derived from the Comparative Manifesto Project, https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/

[8] Owing to a range of factors including changing policy competency in UK elections over time (i.e. shifting policy powers between EC/ EU as well as devolved governments/ legislatures); and the varying propensity of parties to use 'mini', dedicated manifestos to set out specific policies to targeted groups or on specific issues.

[9] Underlining this striking rise in salience, the last general election in 2010 saw the two main state-wide parties issue standalone, dedicated publications - or 'mini-manifestos' on sport. These are excluded from the foregoing analysis in order to ensure data consistency and comparability over successive election cycles.

[10] Correlation coefficient 0.945

[11] Yates' P = 0.0000011, χ^2= 27.446, df = 2.

[12] Yates' P = 7e-8, χ^2 = 34.606, df = 2.

[13] P =0.00000416, χ^2= 24.778, df = 2

[14] P= 0.00004876, χ^2 = 19.857, df = 2

[15] Not statistically significant (P = 0.06623806)

[16] P=0.011109, χ^2= 9, df = 2

[17] Not statistically significant (P= 0.11601915).

[18] P= 0.04978707, χ^2=6, df = 2

[19] All polity total of number of quasi-sentences in 1998/9 = 109, compared with 1,182 in 2011.

[20] Caveat: it should be noted that this is an illustrative measure only. It is not a like-for-like comparison for state-wide election manifestos cover a broader range of policy areas that those at the meso-level (e.g. defence, international relations etc.).

[21] Yates' χ^2= 384.114, df= 2, P= 0.00011432

[22] Anova: Single Factor, Df=2, F= 9.62, F Crit = 3.354, P= 0.000697612

[23] χ^2= 6.481, df= 2, P= 0.03914432

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Figure 1. The issue salience of sport in the three main parties' general election manifestos 1945-2010: All-party absolute totals of quasi-sentences in each election (N= 494).
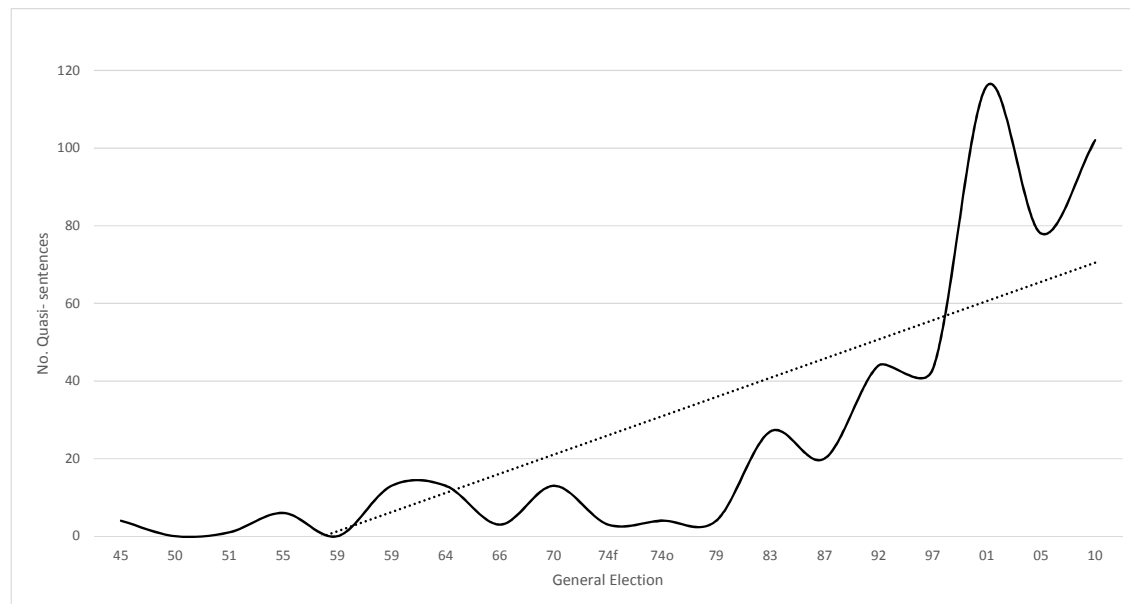
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Figure 2. The issue salience of sport in the three main parties' general election manifestos 1945-2010: Sport as a percentage of all quasi-sentences in each election (N= 3,060).
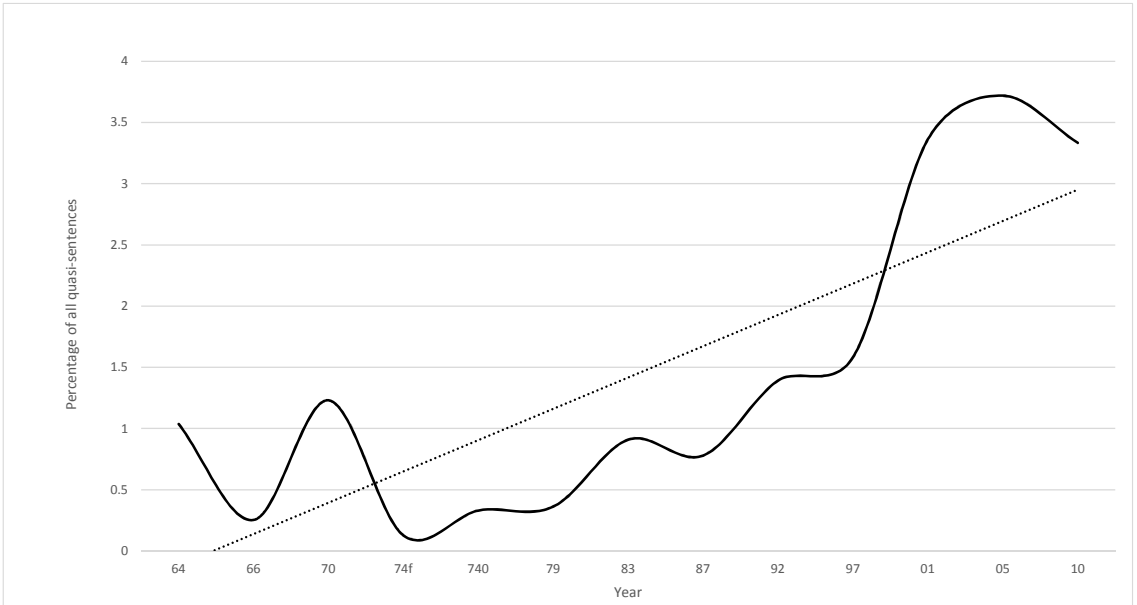
Figure 3. The issue salience of sport in the three main parties' general election manifestos 1945-2010: Total quasi-sentences in each election, by party.
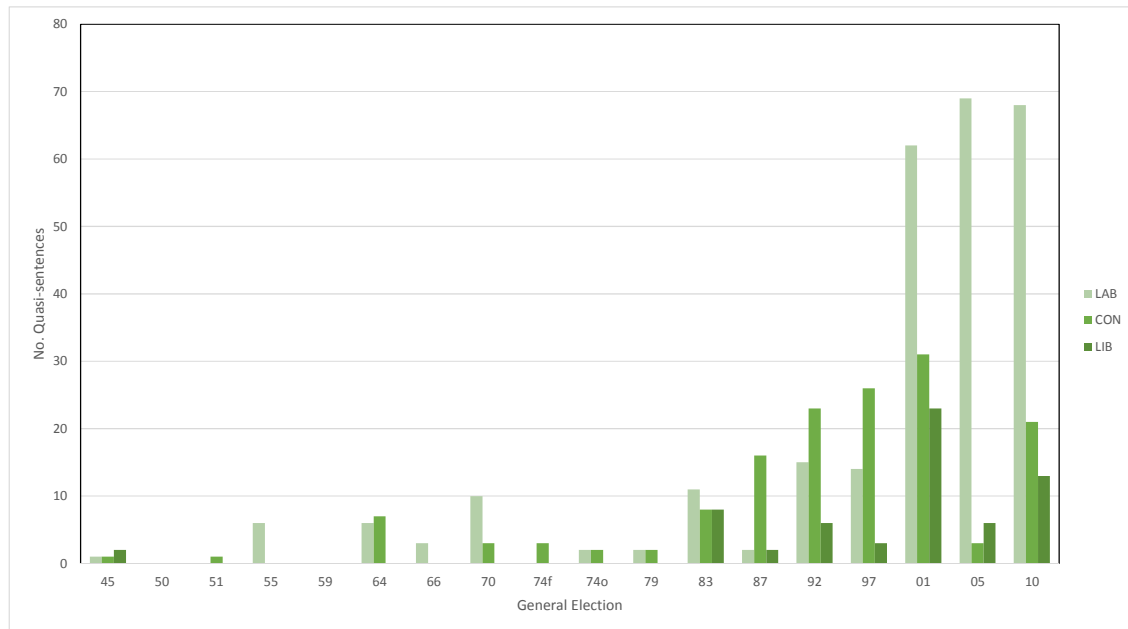
Figure 4. The issue salience of sport in UK meso-elections 1998-2011: Combined total of quasi-sentences in the four main parties' manifestos in each polity, over past four election cycles (N= 1,182).
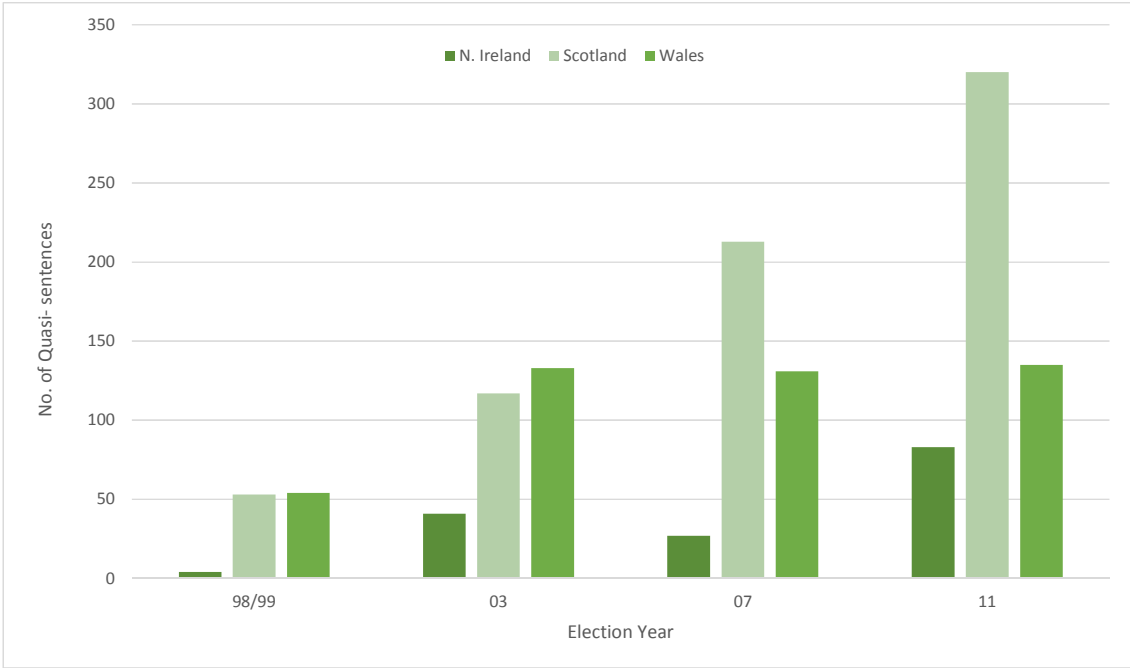
Figure 5. Policy framing profiles: Meso elections 1998-2011 (All-party post-1998/9 total of sport quasi-sentences disaggregated by frame. Each polity = 100%) (N= 1,182).