Mixed-methods analysis of political parties' manifesto discourse on rail transport policy: Westminster, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections 1945–2011

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses a key lacuna by exploring the role of electoral politics in shaping public policy on rail transport in (quasi-)federal systems of governance. Attention centres on issue-salience and policy framing in party manifestos in state-wide and regional elections. The findings reveal a significant rise in issue-salience in parties' Westminster election programmes; with right- and left-of-centre parties increasingly advocating mixed economy approaches to rail transport as part of the wider rise of 'valence politics'. The analysis also reveals how devolution may lead to the territorialisation of rail transport policy. In contrast to parties' Westminster programmes, regional manifesto discourse evidences a general rejection of neo-liberalism and stronger support for state control and/or not-for-profit rail operators. Overall, the findings underline the formative nexus between political representation and public policy – and show how, in the wake of state decentralisation, policy framing is contingent on 'regional' socio-economic factors and party politics, including state-building by civic nationalist parties.

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1. Introduction

The present study makes an original contribution and addresses a knowledge-gap by analysing political parties' manifesto discourse and the framing of policy on rail transport in UK Westminster and regional elections 1945–2011.[1] Existing work underlines the political provenance of rail transport policy (cf. Perl, 2002; Casson, 2009; Gourvish, 1987, 2008; Jackson, 2013; Loft, 2013). As Wragg (2004) cogently notes, 'politics became involved with the railways right from the start'. Yet extant studies have given insufficient attention to the formative phase of rail policy-making. Specifically, electoral politics, mandate-seeking and understanding the way that parties envision rail transport as they seek voters' backing at the ballot box. It is a lacuna that matters in a number of regards. Not least because (1) manifestos provide substantive details of future government (and opposition) parties' policies, (2) they show how parties compare in the priority they attach to rail transport, (3) electoral discourse reveals areas of

inter-party conflict and consensus, and (4) such a focus provides insight into how policy is shaped by party ideology and contingent on local socio-economic and political factors. In these regards it reveals the political use of language and discourse-based processes that underpin the development of public policy on rail transport; thereby providing a 'discursive benchmark' to complement *ex post* analyses of policy delivery (Mees, 2005; Williams et al., 2005).

The present approach is thus concerned with the process of political agenda-setting on rail transport in liberal democracies (Cobb and Ross, 1997). It contributes to understanding of the connection between political representation and rail transport policy. It is a relationship explained by both mandate and accountability theory (Budge and Hofferbert, 1990; Royed, 1996; 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 asserts 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 that they were elected on (Przeworski et al., 1999; Ferejohn, 2003).

Two non-discrete factors heighten the importance of the fore-going theoretical underpinnings: devolution and, the rise of coalition government. In the former case, study of rail transport policy needs to be cognisant of the discursive underpinnings of distinctive territorial approaches. This stems from the pluralising

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of electoral systems that accompanies state decentralisation (or 'devolution') such that single state-wide ballots are supplemented by regional elections. Far from solely being a UK phenomenon, 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). In regard to the second factor, whereas 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. Electoral discourse thus plays a key role in constructing coalition agendas for governing as the respective partners seek to merge party-specific election pledges into a single executive policy programme.

The international rise of meso-government – or 'quasi-federalism' (Gamble, 2006), has important implications for the way that rail transport policy develops. Not least because many unitary states are collectivities of different nations and devolution means that policy is no longer exclusively grounded in unitary 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 rail transport is integral to developing regional infrastructures as part of nation-building. Compared to centralised systems it also offers the potential for closer alignment between 'local' political traditions and attitudes and government policies. In the present case, constitutional reform in the UK has seen the (re-)creation (circa 1998–1999) of national legislatures for Scotland and Wales – and an Assembly for Northern Ireland. Prior to this rail transport policy was solely mandated in UK general elections.[2] Subsequently, a multi-level system operates; policy proposals are also advanced Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish ballots. This is 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.

In summary, the following discussion explores the post-war development of rail transport policy with reference to three principal aims (1) to explore changes in the issue-salience of rail transport in post-war state-wide elections, (2) to examine policy framing in manifesto discourse, and (3) to analyse the impact of state decentralisation. Accordingly, the remainder of the paper is structured thus: a discussion of the literature on the rail transport policy and electoral competition is followed by an outline of the research methodology. The findings are then presented. The main findings and their implications are discussed in the conclusion.

2. Electoral politics: the formative phase of rail transport policy-making

The term 'rail transport policy' refers to purposive interventions linked to the state and the democratic process designed to shape the development and operation of the railways through a combination of instruments including law and regulation, communication and the allocation of resources (see Colebatch (2002) and Hill (2009)). It thus spans a range of factors including: infrastructure, safety, employment, marketing, and economic development.

A survey of extant work reveals a modest literature on rail transport policy and elections. This has largely focused on state grants and subsidies as an electoral issue (Else, 1996), the electoral dimension to rail regulation (McLean and Foster, 1992), the influence of state-trades union relations on voting patterns (Howell, 1999), parties' programmes on competition and regulation (Charlton et al., 1997); electoral debate on nationalisation (Pagoulatos, 2005); policy actors' attitudes to aspects of rail policy (Ludvigsen et al., 2013), the electoral salience of rail policy and environmentalism (Carter, 1992), party pledges on rail modernisation (Liow, 2005) and the electoral politics of rail closures (Loft, 2013).

Accordingly, in order to address the dearth of work exploring the origins of rail transport policy in electoral discourse the following draws upon the theory of 'issue-salience' (RePass, 1971; Robertson, 1976); a conceptualisation whereby key importance lies not only on party issue-positions but on the prominence and attention afforded to different issues in their campaigns; ergo the more an issue is emphasised by a party (making it 'salient'), the greater the likelihood it will attract voters who share similar concerns. Traditionally, quantitative analysis has been used to explore this (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).

By focusing on state-wide and regional elections this study provides insight into the impact of multi-level governance on rail transport policy-making. This locus of enquiry is appropriate because, as noted, 'devolution'- or move to quasi-federalism in the UK is part of the wider international trend of state restructuring (Doornbos, 2006). Under the revised governance structures the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments have responsibility for many aspects of state rail transport policy in their territories.[3] However, it should be noted that the asymmetrical nature of devolution in the UK means that there are contrasts in the powers of the regional governments and legislatures. Moreover, these powers are developing over time. The biggest changes to date include the Transport Act (Wales) 2006 (which significantly enhanced the powers devolved government has over the railways in Wales)[4] and Transport and Works (Scotland) Act 2007 (that revised the legislative process authorising new railways in Scotland).[5] In timescale we consider the post-war decades. This is consistent with existing studies (Gourvish, 1987) and provides insight into a period of major change in rail transport policy in the UK (Faulkner and Austin, 2012).

3. 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 the manifestos. This is applied by logging the number of incidences of key words, ideas or

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[2] With the exception of 1921–1972 elections to the Northern Ireland Parliament.

[3] The UK government and its agencies retain powers in relation to aspects of cross-border railways in Scotland and Wales. For a discussion see http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/157751/0042649.pdf and http://wales.gov.uk/topics/transport/rail/?lang=en [last accessed 17.04.14].

[4] The Welsh Government has powers to develop and fund infrastructure enhancement schemes, develop new rail passenger services, invest in improving the journey experience for rail users, and fund rail freight improvement schemes through the Freight Facility Grant. See http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/5/contents [last accessed 17.04.14].

[5] For a discussion see http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/12/24105544/0 [last accessed 17.04.14].