

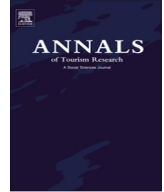


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# Exploring political parties' manifesto discourse on tourism: Analysis of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections 1998–2011



Paul Chaney\*

Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the level of attention ('issue-salience') and use of language ('policy framing') related to tourism in political parties' manifestos in Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections in the UK. The findings reveal significant increases in the salience of tourism as an election issue—as well as parties' contrasting use of language when placing policy proposals before voters. Notably, as part of their state-building agenda, civic nationalist parties put particular emphasis on tourism as an expression of national identity and means of boosting international standing. This study's wider contribution to tourism scholarship lies in showing how public policy is grounded in the representative process and revealing the party politicization and contingent nature of tourism policy development.

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### Introduction

The present study makes an original contribution to understanding the contemporary development of tourism policy by presenting mixed-methods analysis of political parties' manifesto discourse. Its focus is on the level of attention afforded to tourism by parties (or, in the parlance of election studies, 'issue-salience') and the language used (or 'policy framing') in Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish

\* Corresponding author at: Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cathays Park, Cardiff, CF10 3WT, Wales, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)29 20 874000.

E-mail address: [Chaneyp@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:Chaneyp@cardiff.ac.uk)

elections 1998–2011. This has wider international relevance to tourism scholarship because existing work has given insufficient attention to two key factors that shape tourism policy in many states: 1. the global rise of multi-level governance (in other words, where public administration is split across different tiers of government as states decentralise) and; 2. the way that in liberal democracies tourism policy is grounded in the representative process (and thus, the extent to which voters back or reject political parties' proposals on tourism when voting in elections).

The present focus on electoral politics rather than policy implementation is justified in a number of important respects. 1. it centres on the process of mandate-seeking as political parties' compete to secure voters' support for policy proposals on tourism. 2. manifestos provide substantive details of future government (and opposition) parties' policies; 3. They show how parties compare in the priority they attach to tourism; 4. The discourse reveals areas of conflict and consensus between political parties; 5. manifestos provide insight into how policy is shaped by ideology and local socio-economic, historical and political factors; 6. They reveal the political use of language underpinning policy development; and 7. they provide a 'discursive benchmark' (Marks, Hooghe, Steenbergen, & Bakker, 2007)—or means of assessing parties' future delivery of policy pledges.

Accordingly, the present focus is concerned with the process of political agenda-setting (Cobb & Ross, 1997) in relation to tourism. In conceptual terms it is explained by mandate and accountability theories (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990). Mandate theory suggests that governments should implement the policies that they pledge when standing for office. In contrast, accountability theory views elections as 'opinion polls' on whether parties have delivered the policy programme that they were elected on (Ferejohn, 2003).

Recent constitutional reform in the UK (circa 1998/9) makes the UK an interesting context in which to explore the relationship between manifesto discourse and tourism. This is because policy, including that on tourism, is no longer solely mandated in state-wide Westminster elections. Instead, proposals are placed before voters in elections to newly (re-)established legislatures for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This has international relevance to scholars of tourism for it is part of a phenomenon that is far from unique to the UK. 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' (see also Treisman, 2007).

In summary, the following discussion explores the contemporary development of tourism policy by: 1. exploring changes in political parties' level of attention to tourism in their manifestos for Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections 1998–2011; 2. examining the language they use in framing tourism policy proposals; and 3. Analysing and assessing the extent to which the elections (a). provide evidence of the 'party politicization' of tourism policy. And (b). lead to the rise of distinctive local approaches (or 'territorialisation') within the unitary state. Accordingly, the remainder of the paper is structured thus: a summary of the research context precedes discussion of electoral politics and the formative phase of tourism policy-making. This is followed by an outline of the research methodology. The findings are then presented. Their implications are subsequently discussed in the conclusion.

## Research context

The United Kingdom is currently undergoing a process of rapid and significant constitutional reform (Colley, 2011). It is the latest phase in the history of the UK, a political entity formed by the political union of England—first with Wales, and later Scotland and Ireland (Fig. 1). In the latter case, the subsequent independence of the Irish republic in the twentieth century saw the creation of the province of Northern Ireland (circa 1922) (Table 1) (for a full discussion see for example, Mitchell, 2011).

The wider significance of state restructuring to the contemporary study of tourism is that analysis needs to be cognizant of the distinctive territorial approaches to policy *within*—as well as between states. This is particularly important in countries that are unions (or federations) of nations, as in the case of the UK. The prevalence of coalition government at the 'regional' level (owing to widespread use of proportional electoral systems) is an added reason why it is appropriate to focus on manifesto

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