

## Political framing of sports: the mediated politicisation of Oslo's interest in bidding for the 2022 Winter Olympics

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### ABSTRACT

Sport is a malleable phenomenon: it is not obvious what might be contentious about sports and how sports eventually turn into political questions. For years, there had been discussions on whether the city of Oslo should make a bid for the Winter Olympics 2022. In 2012, it was decided that the issue should be the topic for an advisory referendum in 2013. This guaranteed the presence of a sport issue on the public agenda for a longer period. We used the occasion of the referendum to study how a sports issue was framed politically through a content analysis of articles on the issue in a selection of Norwegian papers the year leading up to the election ( $N = 362$ ). We first give a basic overview of number of articles, the papers in which they occur, article type, and timing. Then, we present the stand taken on the issue and identify the actors involved. Two groups of actors, both positive to making a bid, dominated the debate: sport organisations and Oslo politicians. Finally, we look at the issues discussed. The dominant themes were sport facilities, economic questions, urban development, and sport goods. In our conclusion, we emphasised three aspects of the debate. First, Norwegian regional politics were central in giving meaning to the issue and sports-specific benefits became more marginal. Second, the core argument became that we need a large sports event primarily because of indirect effects. Third, sports as a political issue lacks 'severity' and 'efficacy' and sports are lacking 'propriety'.

### KEYWORDS

Content analysis; political framing; Winter Olympics; mega events; Oslo; Norway

### Introduction

Although sports for most of the post-war period has been a topic of only marginal interest for politicians and social researchers, the last decades have seen an increased interest in the topic. Politicians in many nations have responded to societal changes and developed more specific sports policies and researchers have become more concerned with sports, both as a response to developments in sports policies and as part of a broader social science interest in leisure and culture (Houlihan 2000, Bergsgard *et al.* 2007, Jefferys 2012, Hallmann and Petry 2013, Henry and Ko 2013). Political researchers have especially been concerned with two sets of issues when it comes to sports, the first of which is the structure of sports politics and how the actors involved – sports organisations, politicians, and bureaucrats – interact. With the Norwegian case, as an example, studies of sport politics have taken place as a discussion of whether political processes in sports are best studied as some type of corporatism or as looser political networks (Goksøyr 1996, Houlihan 1997, Bergsgard and Rommetvedt 2006, Enjolras and Waldahl 2007). The second set of issues relate to the implementation

of sport policies (Houlihan 2005, Skille 2008, 2009). Much less focus has been placed on the basic political sociological question of *content* and how sports are given political meanings in societal and political processes. This is, however, a very timely question because, as Bergsgard *et al.* (2007) point out, sports are politically malleable phenomena. Accordingly, it is often unclear what it is about sports that is contentious, and how sports issues take on political meanings. In this study, we investigate how sports become politicised through a study of how sports are articulated politically in the public sphere: What are people talking about when they talk about sports politically? Who is talking? How are sports issues linked to more general political and ideological orientations? In short, how are sports framed politically?

An opportunity to investigate these questions in detail arose when citizens of Oslo, Norway had the chance to vote in a referendum designed to determine whether the city of Oslo should make a bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics, which would take place alongside the Parliamentary election of 2013. Arranging a referendum to decide on sports issues put sports policies clearly on the public agenda, and 'guaranteed' a continued presence of the issue in the media. This made it possible to look into how sports as an issue over a longer period of time was articulated and discussed. In this article, we describe the media debate that led up to the referendum: Who had their voices heard? Which issues were discussed? Did the discussants take positive, neutral or negative stands on the issue? Based on answers to these questions, we end the article with a more general discussion of how sports were politicised.

Even though this 'Olympic bid issue' is only one issue among many potential sports issues, we think it is a useful and interesting case. First, this is an issue involving the basic question of funding for sports, and therefore has a clear economic dimension. Second, it is an issue that involves the most important policy tool in many nations' sports politics: sports facilities. Third, the issue involves the one political dimension along which sports have 'always' been discussed in a Norwegian context: mass sports versus elite sports (Goksøy 2008, Andersen and Ronglan 2012). Fourth, it is also interesting because it is a topic, which, in the end, depended on the Parliament taking a stand, whereas sports issues in the Norwegian context often do not reach the public political agenda at all. Finally, the issue of sport mega events is becoming both more common and more contested (Parent and Smith-Swan 2013) at the same time as sports, implying sporting events, have become a more central part of various nations' foreign 'soft power' policies. To host a mega-event or not is mostly also a political question, and there is an increasing literature addressing these issues (Cornelissen 2010, Foley *et al.* 2012, Merkel 2014, Reiche 2014, Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, Grix *et al.* 2015). Moreover, an interesting question is if there is a trend towards only special types of countries being applicants for such events, how does the Norwegian debate fit into and/or reflect such a trend. Another question of importance is also debates on the economic effects of hosting mega events (Jakobsen *et al.* 2012).

Against this background, the empirical substance of this article is a content analysis of the media coverage in national newspapers (September 2012–September 2013) about the topic of Oslo's application for the 2022 Olympics. In the next section, we will give some information on the case, present relevant previous research, and provide the theoretical framework to be applied. Thereafter, we will present the data and methods. The results will then be outlined in three sections: (i) the number of articles, in which papers they occur, the type of articles, and the publication dates; (ii) the stand taken on the issue and the actors involved; and (iii) the issues discussed. In the final section, we will link our empirical findings to the question of how sports are framed politically and make some suggestions for future research.

## Background: the Olympic referendum and Norwegian sports policies

The debate on a Norwegian bid for a Winter Olympics is not new. From 2004 to 2008, Tromsø (in Northern Norway) was the most likely candidate for making a bid, with its representatives preparing bids for both the 2014 and 2018 Winter Olympics. In both cases, there were rivalries between various regional sites, and both processes ended without bids being delivered (Holmen 2010). After

these failed attempts, Oslo appeared more likely to make a bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics. Not surprisingly, this made for debates as to why Oslo, as the capital located in the south, should bid for the Olympics when Tromsø's bids for two previous Olympics were rejected. So, when the bid preparation process started, many politicians outside Oslo were from the start rather reluctant to support Oslo making a bid for the Olympics.

The history leading up to the bid for the 2022 Olympics emerging as a referendum was rather peculiar. For years, there have been plans to build a new museum in Oslo for the world-famous painter, Edvard Munch. Because of disagreements between the Conservative Party and the Progress Party (two of the parties making up the Oslo City Government coalition) regarding the plans for the new museum, the Progress Party broke off its cooperation with the Conservative Party before the local election in 2011. The Conservative Party thereafter cooperated with both the Liberal Party and the Christian People's Party, but during the budget discussion for 2013, these three parties still depended on the Progress Party for a majority; as a result, they were forced, somewhat reluctantly, into making the 'Olympics issue' a referendum topic.

The Olympic bid's emergence as a topic for a referendum as part of a general election was, in many ways, an anomaly (Bjørklund 2014). What made this referendum special was that *national* interests were to be voted on, and potentially decided, in a *local* referendum. The election was expected to be even, and opinion polls indicated a marginal no- victory for a long period before eventually turning towards a yes majority when closing in on the election date. Apart from the election itself, another main event was the publication of Oslo municipality's report on the issue (April 2013). The election result showed a majority (53.5%) in favour of Oslo bidding, with a minority (43.6%) voting against sending an application. A small percentage of the voters (2.9%) abstained. While the turnout for municipal elections in Oslo was 80.2%, only 74.2% participated in the referendum on the Olympics. About one year after the election, the Parliament decided to not give the necessary financial guarantees for the bid, and the process was terminated.

To contextualise our study, a brief overview of Norwegian sports politics is useful. For both the state and the sports federation, the overall aim is 'sports for all', even though considerable amounts of resources and attention are also devoted to elite sports (NIF 2011, St Meld 2012). The most important arenas for sports and exercise among adults are fitness centres and 'local environments'. Sports clubs are mostly for children and adolescents (Breivik and Hellevik 2014). In Norway, as in most nations, there is widespread support for the view that sports are good for children and their socialisation, whereas the support for other aspects of sports is more controversial. In addition, the most important policy tool is monetary funding and, from public authorities, the most important means to facilitate activity is the funding of facilities.

In a historical perspective, the Norwegian national identity has been tightly linked to winter sports (Goksøyr 1998). On both Nordic (Andersen and Ronglan 2012) and global levels (<http://www.greatestsportingnation.com>; De Bosscher (2008); Kuper and Szymanski (2009)), Norway is both a very successful sporting nation (per capita) and the most football-dedicated nation in the world (Kuper and Szymanski 2009). For the purpose of this article, one may assume that Norwegians have an overwhelming interest in sports, especially winter sports, which should indicate that there could be solid support for organising sporting events such as a Winter Olympics. At the same time, the history of Norwegian sports – and especially elite sports (Goksøyr and Hanstad 2012) – also tells a story about conflicts between mass sports and elite sports.

Today, the government's sport policies are linked to instrumental as well as intrinsic values (St Meld 2012). For the former, health benefits of physical activity and organised sport as an arena for social inclusion and integration are central. For the latter, the joy of sports in themselves are the main justification. As an intermediate, we find aims as belonging, community, identity, and national pride (which are assumed to be positive for individuals as well as for the state). For the subsequent analysis, two of these factors appear as especially relevant: the extent to which an event such as

the Olympics will tilt the balance between elite sports and mass sports financially and whether the national pride argument is strong enough to justify expenditures as huge as the Olympics imply.

## Theoretical framework

Social movements attempt to politicise issues, very often by linking specific practical problems to more general ideological master narratives. In this study, we want to investigate how sports issues are politicised, and a useful approach from social movement studies aimed at exactly understanding how an issue eventually becomes contested and is made political (Warren 1999) is found in the so-called framing perspective (Benford and Snow 2000).

In political sociological terms, framing is understood as “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large’ (Snow *et al.* 1986). Thus, to understand if and how an issue becomes contested and political, we have to study how it is framed politically. In our case, this implies an identification of the dimensions along which our sports political issue is articulated, how these articulations relate to each other and to larger ideological questions and how they fit into already established political cleavages.

From this description of the Olympic bid discourse, we will discuss what kind of political dimensions this articulation of the issue might represent. Benford and Snow (2000) emphasised three tasks as central to successful political framing. One task is to provide a *diagnosis*. In our case, this will be a question of what actors choose to see as problems with organising the Olympics in Oslo. A second framing task is to make a *prognosis* or suggest *solutions*. In our case, this question should turn towards a stance on the issue of making a bid or not: Are the problems with making a bid serious enough to go against the whole idea of making a bid? The third task discussed by Benford and Snow (2000) is *motivation*: how do involved actors experience the severity, urgency, efficacy, and propriety of sports-related political questions? Whereas the result section of the article will concentrate on a description of the media debate, the discussion will try to sort out what are seen as problems, how these problems eventually are related to a stand on the issue, and how these ways to frame the issue in the end motivate political action (or not).

## Data and methods

Even though the debate on the Olympics issue took place on several media platforms – web, TV, radio, and print – we have chosen to concentrate on national newspapers as our data source. This is partly because newspapers are easily available, and also because we assume that the print news format is still an important channel for political debates. We have chosen to focus on national papers as opposed to local or regional papers both because they are the most important arena for *national politics*, and because one of these papers, *Aftenposten*, functions as both a national newspaper and the main regional paper for the Oslo region.

Our sample includes all articles in the national newspapers that are available from Retriever<sup>1</sup> (17.09.13). We used a search string, [(‘OL-2022’ or ‘OL 2022’ or ‘OL i 2022’) and ‘Oslo’], for the period 9 September 2012–9 September 2013 – that is, the year leading up to the referendum. The search resulted in 362 articles, of which 14 were removed during the coding process due to lack of relevance for the study.

The most difficult part of the analysis was the coding of the articles (Saldaña 2013). Except for some information contained in the data material (i.e., name of newspaper, date of publication, title of the article), the coding was done manually. Each participating researcher was given approximately 50 articles to code, starting with a set of variables that were relatively straightforward to code; names of article authors and names of actors speaking through the articles. Since several actors were just mentioned *en passant*, the challenge for this part of the coding was determining which names to include in the study. The most significant and also more challenging part of the

coding concerned which themes the articles were invoking. We started out with a list of potential themes based on both our knowledge of the case (having ourselves followed the debate in the media) and previous sports-related politics research (Enjolras *et al.* 2005, Bergsgard and Rommetvedt 2006, Seippel 2008, Skille 2009, Bergsgard and Norberg 2010). To this list, a few topics were added during the coding process. The coding revealed that many of the articles contained numerous themes, and the challenge was to identify all of them and then to decide on which themes to exclude. A second task requiring code work was determining whether the articles were arguing in favour of or against positions, or were neutral.

The reliability and validity of the data were checked by inter-reliability tests (Krippendorff 2004). Each article was first coded by one researcher and then recoded and checked by a second researcher. In cases of disagreement, the researchers discussed the issue until agreement was reached. Two types of divergences dominated. First, when checking with a second coder, there was a difference in the number of themes included in similar articles by different coders. Discussion between coders in cases of discrepancy on how important themes were for the overall debate resolved this issue. Second, some coders had coded more articles than other coders as neutral. The reason for these disagreements was that many articles had a balanced presentation of topics but nevertheless took an implicit stand on the issue. In the last round of coding, the researchers agreed on a common and stricter understanding of what counted as a stance – lack of balance – on an issue; as a result, more articles were coded as neutral. These findings reflect the journalistic norm of balanced presentations where many articles, even though their starting point is support or critique, end up also inviting the opposite voice, and thereby become mostly neutral.

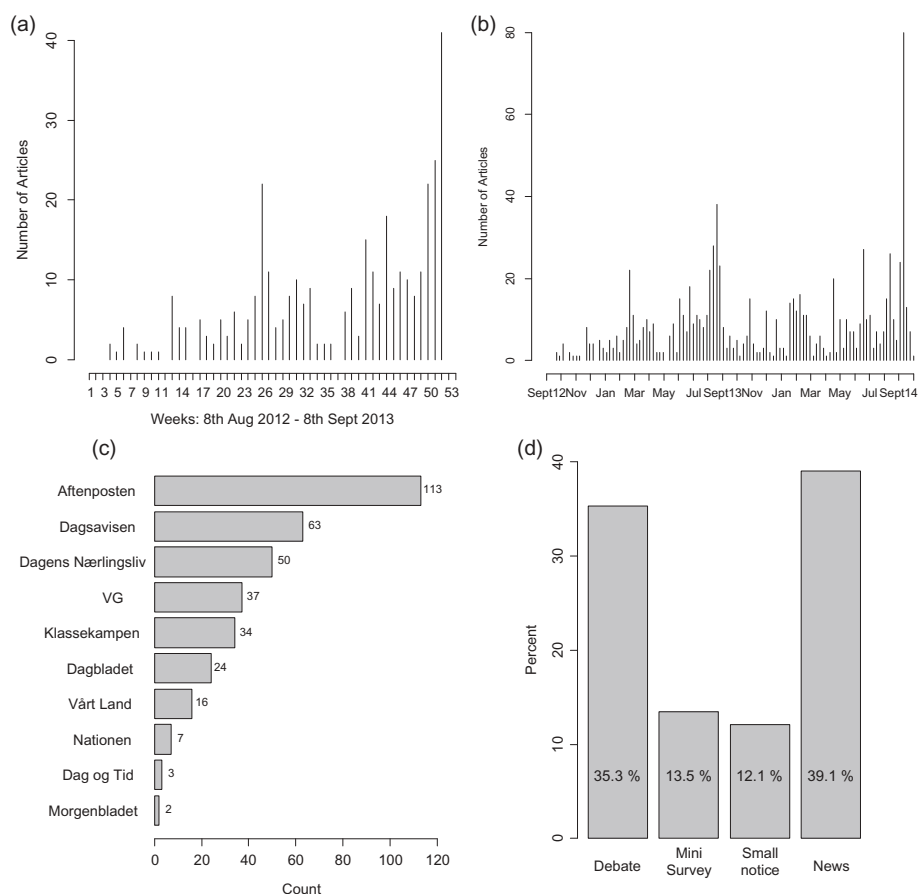
Since the purpose of this study is partly exploratory and aimed at a description of how sports are framed in the media, the methods are simple uni and bivariate frequencies where we show (i) some background information (date, newspaper, and type of article), (ii) some more detailed information on the stances taken in the article and the actors having their voices heard,<sup>2</sup> and (iii) descriptions of the themes that occurred in the debates.

## Results

### *Time, newspapers, and type of articles*

Figure 1(a, b) show the frequency of articles. Figure 1(a) shows the number of articles covered in our study up to the election. Our two assumptions about peaks of interest related to the publication of Oslo municipality's report and the election itself are, not surprisingly, confirmed. Figure 1(b) illustrates the volume of published articles in the year following our study and leading up to the political decision (1 October 2014) not to provide a financial guarantee for the bid.

Figure 1(c) shows that the most frequently read paper, *Aftenposten*, which has a daily print run of 214,026, published the highest number of articles on our issue, followed by the much smaller, social democratic *Dagsavisen*, which is ranked 20th in readership with a print run of 23,065.<sup>3</sup> Part of the reason for the dominance of these two papers is probably their identities as both national and local papers for the Oslo area. The third highest number of articles were found in the national finance paper, *Dagens Næringsliv* (DN), with a print run of 80,595, which contained a daily mini survey during the summer (i.e., towards the end of the period of analysis), where famous persons were asked a standard set of questions, including their stand on the question of whether Oslo should bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics or not. Fourth in number of articles was VG, a relatively neutral-to-traditionally slightly centre-right newspaper with the second highest print run of all the papers, 164,430. The fifth highest number of articles were found in the leftist *Klassekampen*, ranked 30th in readership with a print run of 17,648, and the paper with the sixth highest number was *Dagbladet*, a relatively neutral-to-traditionally slightly left-liberal newspaper with the fourth highest print run, 80,028.

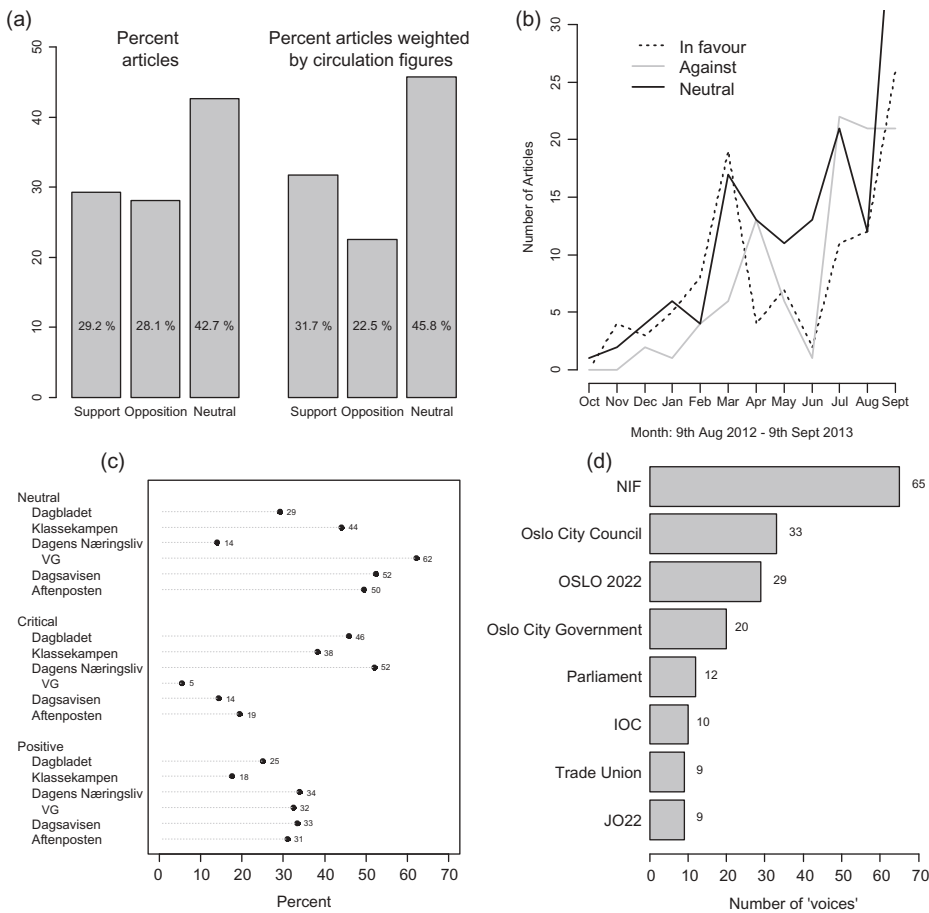


**Figure 1.** (a) Number of articles in the weeks covered by our data. (b) Number of articles in the whole period. (c) Number of articles in various Norwegian papers ( $n = 349$ ), and (d) type of article addressing the issues (% out of the 349).

Figure 1(d) shows that for type of articles, 39% were news articles, followed by a high number (36%) of debate articles. The latter indicates that the Olympic issue was not only covered by the journalists of the newspapers, but also engaged individuals and representatives of organisations in the debate. Moreover, there were 14% mini surveys and 12% small notices where the issue was covered.

### **Stands and voices**

An 'everyday reading' of the press coverage had given most of the researchers involved an impression of a relatively heated and conflict-ridden debate. Our more systematic study of stances on the issue partly confirmed this view, but nevertheless gave a somewhat surprising result because the largest number of articles (43%) were coded as neutral, and the supportive and critical articles were relatively equal in numbers (29% and 28%, respectively). Figure 2(a) shows how the proportion of supportive articles wins out at the cost of opposing articles when the numbers of articles are weighted by newspapers' print runs. We think there are two reasons for this impression of neutrality. On the one hand, the results partly reflect a situation where the largest political parties – the Conservatives and the Social Democrats – never took an explicit stand on the issue. On the other hand, another reason for the many neutral articles is the journalistic norm of balanced coverage, which is based on the ethical code (Vær Varsom-plakaten<sup>4</sup>) of the Norwegian Press



**Figure 2.** (a) Proportion of positions on the issue, (b) Numbers of articles with different stances on the issue over time, (c) Proportion of positions in various newspapers, (d) actors (institutional) having their voices heard in the debate. IOC; International Olympic Committee.

Association demanding that editors and journalists base their practice on, among other things, allowing different views to be expressed on the issue at hand.

Regarding the temporal patterns of stances on the issue in the articles (Figure 2(b)), the main finding is that the proportions are relatively stable over time except for the period leading up to the election, when the neutral and supportive articles become more dominant and the critical articles remain stable. Figure 2(c) shows how the different newspapers contain articles reflecting different positions on the issue. The main finding is that the leftist paper *Klassekampen* and the (previous) left-liberal *Dagbladet* are less positive and more critical. Apart from these two papers, most others have an equal proportion of positive articles, and larger variation in critical stances.

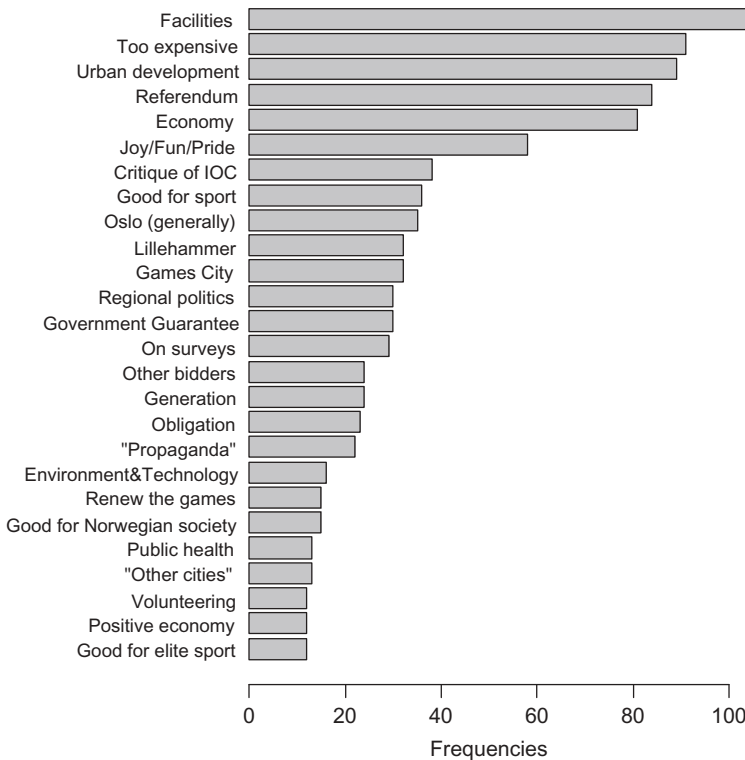
Finally, we examined which actors voiced their opinions in the discussions, and several results are worth consideration. First, there are two main groups of actors, both of whom are mostly supportive. The largest group consists of representatives for the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF), with 65 voices counted and presented in Figure 2(d). This group includes both representatives from NIF's central units, and persons talking on behalf of specific national sports federations or representatives of NIF's regional units. The second largest collection of discussants, consisting of three subgroups, are representatives for the city of Oslo. One group, Oslo city council, consists of 59 elected politicians and is led by the



mayor. A second group is the Oslo city government, which consists of seven ministers who are each responsible for one department.<sup>5</sup> The third group of voices were represented by 'Oslo 2022', which was a temporary municipality agency established to prepare the bid for the games. Combined, the city of Oslo had 82 voices, mostly positive and some neutral, in the analysed articles. All in all, these two first clusters of actors total 147 voices, mostly positive. Additionally, four other types of actors made some contributions: members of Parliament, the IOC (mostly supportive), trade unions (mostly critical), and JO2022 (an organisation established with the sole purpose of promoting Oslo as a bidder). A second main finding is based on what is only implicit in Figure 2 (d): there were no institutions representing the critical voices, which comprised less-organised individuals.

## Themes

The main question for our article is how sports are framed when a sports issue becomes contested and, eventually, turns into a political issue. We have identified the most frequent themes invoked in the debate. A first noteworthy finding regards the high number of themes that were discussed, and the fact that most articles contained several themes. The impression from the coding was further that most of the themes were used or discussed by both supporters and opponents, making it difficult to find systematic patterns in the arguments used by the actors. Looking in more detail at the themes (see Figure 3), we have chosen to present a relatively extensive list of themes to give an overall impression of how the issue was presented and discussed.



**Figure 3.** Frequencies of topics in the newspapers. 2.9 themes per article. 'Economy' means general economic topics not covered by the other economy-oriented labels (too expensive, positive (to the) economy). 'Good for sport' means general arguments in favour of sport, 'Good for elite sport' is more specific arguments. 'On surveys' mean discussion of the many surveys taken up during the period leading up to the referendum.



We will comment more thoroughly on four findings, and will very briefly discuss them as they relate to sports and sports-related politics, traditional political cleavages, and the question of what stimulates or gives life to the debate.

First, the theme most often addressed is 'facilities'. This is a familiar issue for sports-related politicians and a common argument in the bid for major sport events (Swart and Bob 2004), yet it was not clearly linked to established political cleavages except for regional antagonisms. In Norwegian sport politics, facilities in rural areas have been prioritised, but in the last decade, there has been a change in priorities, with urban areas catching up. Thus, the reason for prioritising the Oslo region because of a lack of sports infrastructure was not as obvious as some years ago, and the result was an opposition claiming that Oslo was getting too much attention. As the issue was discussed, what seemed to give life to the conflict was how important both sports and elite sports were considered. Some actors were critical or supportive of funding facilities because sports were or were not seen as important, or because elite sports were considered more or less important than mass sports.

Second, 'economy' (in general) and 'too expensive' show up as the second and fifth most prevalent themes. The emphasis on economy and costs resonates well with larger meta-events narratives and is a common argumentation mentioned in the media coverage of the Olympic bid withdrawals observed lately. Yet, in a Norwegian context, economic questions related to sports politics are seldom discussed publicly because the public funding is provided through lottery money, which is provided independent of the control of Parliament. Neither are there very clear links between the willingness to fund sports and the political cleavages. Again, it seems as what matters for taking a stand on this issue – or what motivates discussions on it – is the importance attached to (elite) sports, whether or not it is a public responsibility to help out with these types of events.

Themes of 'urban development' and 'Oslo (generally)' together indicate that a large portion of the debate addressed how developing and organising the Olympics could eventually matter for the city of Oslo (where population is supposed to grow dramatically in the decades to come and which is, consequently, in dire need of developing its infrastructure). The emphasis on urban development concurs with previous research on the Olympic bidding process, where urban development has been found to be used as legitimisation argument for building larger sports arenas (Swart and Bob 2004). This is a topic rather marginal to sports-related political debates, but it resonates well with one of the more general political cleavages – regionalism or the centre-periphery dimension – so central to Norwegian politics.

Finally, sports themselves – providing fun, making people proud – come to the fore as the sixth most prevalent topic: Oslo should make a bid because sports and sporting events are fun, and because the Olympics would put Oslo and Norway on the international agenda. The contrasting view was that one should not make a bid because sports are not that important, sporting events are not that fun, and it is not that important to stand out as a sporting nation (alternatively: research shows that organising sports events do not help very much for promoting a place (Jakobsen *et al.* 2012)). As a result, the discussion is about the idea and value of sports, a recurrent theme in both public and private documents on sports. It is probably linked to the question of mass sports versus elite sports, and what children's sports should look like. Such questions regarding the worth of sports have no direct link to or resonance in the traditional political landscape. The fact that pure sports arguments ended up ranked sixth indicates that political sports debates tend to address mostly non-sports issues, and these non-sports issues are what eventually give legitimacy to an issue as discussed in this article.

These more purely sports-based questions are related to a host of smaller positive topics, where voices hold that the Olympics would be good for sports and for the younger generation (especially those too young to remember the Lillehammer Olympics of 1994), and would be generally good for Norwegian society: through public health by encouraging physical activity, promoting volunteerism, and stimulating the economy. And, of course, the Olympics would be good for elite sports.

Moreover, some bid supporters argued that Norway has a social responsibility to organise the Olympics from time to time, not just travel around the world to collect medals while other nations pay for the party.

## Discussion

In this article, we have studied the debate in Norwegian newspapers on whether Oslo should make a bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics or not. Data has consisted of the content of 362 articles in national Norwegian newspapers during the year leading up to an 'advisory' referendum linked to the ordinary Parliament election in September 2013.

We have described the timing of the articles with two peaks: one at the time of the delivery of an essential consultancy report to the Oslo municipality, and one when time was closing in on the election. The newspapers covering the issue most thoroughly were *Aftenposten* and *Dagsavisen*: national papers, yet also with a special local link to Oslo. The coverage was evenly shared between news articles and more debate-like material. Moreover, we found that a little more than 40% of the articles reflected a neutral position. When 'mechanically' counted, there was a relatively even distribution of articles supporting and opposing a bid; this balance, however, shifted towards an advantage for supportive articles – 32% supporting, 23% opposing – when the numbers were weighted by papers' circulation figures. The overall impression was, nevertheless, the dominance of neutral (balanced) articles.

Next, our analysis indicated that of the voices heard in the debate, two groups dominated: actors related to sports, first and foremost actors related to NIF, and partly also to the IOC and second, actors representing political institutions in Oslo (Oslo City Council, Oslo City Government and politicians representing Oslo nationally). In short, the actors most clearly represented in the debate were those connected to sports and regional interests. No organised opponents to the issue appeared in our data. Finally, we have described the most prominent themes in the articles. 'Facilities' turned out to be the most prevalent theme, followed by economic issues, with actors very much emphasising that organising the Olympics would be 'too expensive'. A third set of themes concerned the city of Oslo, both in general and, most predominantly, as a discussion of 'urban development'. The final group of themes addressed sports as valuable in themselves: providing fun and joy, or serving as a source of pride. In addition to these four main themes, there was a plethora of smaller themes (Figure 3).

In the introduction to the article, we stated that studies of sports politics so far have not been particularly concerned with the question of how sports, which are mostly seen and reported as rather innocent everyday activities, ultimately turn into political issues. How, eventually, are sports made contentious and framed politically? To answer this question, we introduced a theoretical framework taken from social movements studies. We end this article by interpreting our data in light of this theoretical framework and answer the question: How are sports framed politically?

According to our chosen theoretical framework, the first step in making something political is to make a *diagnosis*: to point out something as lacking according to a standard; as problematic. As explained herein, there appear to be two dominating contexts where sports are problematised and given political momentum in our data: (1) the actors who are most active (e.g., actors related to sports, actors politically associated with the city of Oslo), and (2) the themes they chose to discuss when promoting their interests and values.

The first context is related to sports themselves, and operates at two levels. At the most general level, the question is the extent to which actors consider sports a worthy endeavour at all (or in itself). At a more sports-specific level, it is a question of how elite sports (which inevitably are in focus in this case) are valued relative to mass sports. From the most general level, discussants are either reasonably supportive or sceptical to the whole idea of supporting the funding of something they do or do not find worthy of support. In practice, this will probably appear as a relative stance: sports of a certain type do not deserve public funding compared to something else, especially

welfare provisions such as health and education. Positions on the more sports-specific level point towards the question of Olympics are the best way to spend resources. If it is reasonable to spend resources on sports, the resources should be spent on childrens' sports, or, alternatively, the investments in Olympic infrastructure should also benefit athletes and exercisers more generally.

The second context is the larger societal and political one, conventionally captured by political scientists as 'cleavages'. For sports as a political issue, the question is which cleavages (i.e., general societal values and/or conflicts) are drawn upon when discussing sports. The main contexts, based on Norwegian studies of politics, have been traditional class conflicts (labour-capital), primary-secondary/tertiary industries, and regional conflicts (urban-rural antagonisms) (Rokkan 1970). More recent studies of the issues and attitudes relevant in Norwegian elections leave us with six ideological dimensions: immigration and solidarity, welfare state topics (public-private), religion versus secular values, environmentalism, centre-periphery (regional) conflicts, and global-national antagonisms (Aardal 2011).

In our case, only one of these traditional cleavages or newer issues stands out as important for the bid debate: regional differences. Regional conflicts ignited the issue from the start, when Northern Norway was not seen as a suitable bidder for the Olympics, some claimed Oslo should not be either. A negative stance, although seldom explicit, made for scepticism to spread. Second, regional interests also put their mark on location questions. When it was accepted that Oslo, eventually, should be the main location for the event, the next question was: which locations in the surrounding area of Oslo should also be part of the event? This led to positions dependent on the concrete location of alpine and skating facilities. Third, with respect to the referendum itself: Why should only citizens of Oslo give their vote when the guarantee for funding was to be given by a national institution? Fourth, previous studies have shown that there actually are fewer sports facilities (relative to population) in the larger cities than in rural areas; this was used as an argument in favour of making a bid for Oslo, and was also probably an important explanatory factor for why 'facilities' and 'urban development' ended up as the most important issues in the debate. Finally, demographic prognoses predict that Oslo will be one of the largest growing urban areas of Europe in coming decades, and accordingly is in need of infrastructural developments (regardless of what happens to the Olympics). It does not follow from this prognosis that Oslo should be favoured at the cost of other areas, but it nevertheless made urban development in Oslo a very relevant topic, and paved the way for a discussion of whether this should be an occasion for urban development (as a side effect) and whether this was an efficient way to conduct urban development.

On the question of other cleavages having importance for sports, the environmental argument was deployed by some actors as was the solidarity argument, that is the idea that Norway, as a prosperous nation, should take responsibility and occasionally stage events such as the Olympics. By and large, though, common political ideologies and issues seemed rather peripheral. When the only political parties with a clear stand on the issue are the parties at the respective left and right flanks, this indicates that some actors perceive the Olympics alliance as an elite alliance: the sports elite join the urban Oslo-elite, which makes a good enemy for the opposition parties.

That regional differences have a pivotal role in political discussions should come as no surprise, but the question of why sports are so seldom linked to the other cleavages deserves some comments. In one way, this is in the Norwegian tradition, which places sports-related politics beyond politics, a perception illustrated and reinforced by sports being funded by lottery money and hence not being part of ordinary political decision-making processes. This also reflects the fact that the organisational autonomy of sports is taken for granted, and even though considerable public funding and market sponsors are used for sports, the organisations delivering sports functions are, and should be, voluntary. In this context, one interpretation of this situation could be that sports are seen as less important than health and education and accordingly should be left to amateurs. Nevertheless, the idea that sports are best organised by voluntary organisations is taken for granted and not discussed. It should be noted, however, that both these explanatory factors have a shaky status and could be challenged in the future. The dependency on lottery

money, which has involved a low level of politicisation, is challenged by global commercial betting bureaus, and NIF's near-monopoly for organised sports is threatened by commercial providers of sports and exercise.

The second factor for successful political mobilisation is to make a *prognosis*: What is the response to the problem? The issue at stake is funding of an elite sports event: What position should be taken on the issue? Which arguments should be applied? The problems are (i) that sports are not seen as important enough for this extensive public funding, (ii) that elite sports are not worthy of these types of funding, and (iii) that this specific way of funding sports in Oslo (the capital) is not reasonable because of regional differences.

These three problems do interact, and there are obviously also other issues and arguments in this debate. However, these are the core arguments that we will focus on in this study. The most immediate response to this challenge is obviously to support or oppose the bid because sports are or are not considered important enough, or Oslo does or does not deserve it. For this study, the more interesting question is how this way to problematise the issue affects the debate: which issues and arguments appeared convincing in the public sphere?

A first finding is that for many discussants, sports in themselves seem less convincing as the main argument. Even though there are a certain number of articles promoting the bid because sports are fun and sporting events could lead to national pride, the prevalence of these arguments is low, especially in light of sports being the absolute centre of the whole topic. The more indirect 'sport as good for health' never won a prominent place in the debate.

The weakness of sports as an argument in themselves is also clear from the prominence of the 'too expensive' argument and from financial worries more generally: a sporting event such as the Olympics is simply not worth the resources needed. The lack of willingness to pay for the event is, for economists, the decisive factor against the importance of elite sports.

The fact that the most debated themes are, primarily, non-sports themes also indicates that to win an argument about sports, the issue has to be linked to other themes. First, what is obviously an elite sporting event is framed as an issue that might benefit mass sports and exercise more generally: organising the Olympics will give a boost for building of sports facilities, which otherwise would not have been built. Second, the infrastructure emanating from the events would help develop the city of Oslo.

The main point here is that the debate is directed away from sports, and the pure sports argument loses out in the overall argumentative competition. In the end, we need a large sporting event mainly because of its indirect effects. The legitimacy of elite sports probably is lower than sports' place as a spectacular celebrity issue in the media should indicate. Elite sports are framed as mass sports/general physical activity or something else. Even though the explicit regional aspect itself was not too high on the agenda, it is clearly an aspect that lurks in the background and gives direction and intensity to 'urban development' and 'facility' arguments as relevant issues in sports.

The third aspect of effective political mobilisation is how people might be *motivated* to work with sports politically. As we see it, there are two sets of answers to this question. First, we see that at a general level, sports seldom seem to represent a political 'call to arms'. Even though sports are part of political processes, they still have relatively low legitimacy, especially when it comes to elite sports. At the same time, because sports are politically malleable, they lack clear-cut political ideological relevance, and are given political meaning in the local and concrete contexts where they are articulated. The result is that sports are not well-suited for the motivation of larger and more general political mobilisation. Sports as politics seem too vague to bring people (even close) to the streets.

Second, looking at the more specific aspects of the motivation process also gives insights into how sports might function politically. Benford and Snow (2000) mention four factors that provide motivation for political mobilisations: 'Severity, urgency, efficacy and propriety'. Regarding *severity*, sports, and especially elite sports, are still seen as a leisure activity or superficial entertainment, organised by amateurs or oligarchs, and thus do not suffice to ignite interest, positively or

negatively, for political action. The low number of explicit sports themes in the debate indicates the lack of sports severity. *Urgency*, the premise that a decision had to be made, animated the debate in our instance: without a concrete decision coming up on the agenda, sports would have been left with its ordinary low tone, backstage discussions. Whether taking part in the debate would affect the debate, or *efficacy*, was not clear. On the one side, established actors made their arguments; on the other side, there were no visible networks or organisations to mobilise. Finally, mass sports are seen as socially or morally well meaning, but the *propriety* of elite sports is still contested. The lack of social and moral worthiness aside from entertainment and celebrity makes elite sports an inappropriate issue for political mobilisation. At present, elite sports as represented by the Olympics seem like issues not relevant for, or worthy of, political mobilisation.

## Conclusion

This study provides insight into a theme not very well understood so far. Given the general importance of sports, physical activity, and exercise in modern, sedentary societies, and societal changes related to the funding of sports, a better understanding of how a malleable issue such as sports functions as a political issue in the public sphere should be worth more study.

Our study has given some insights into how one sports issue, Oslo's bid for the Winter Olympics, in one nation, Norway, was given political meaning. More studies should obviously look at this (i) from the perspectives of other events and different sports, and (ii) in nations with both differing sports traditions and varying political cultures.

We have relied on a theoretical framework developed for understanding political mobilisation in general; yet, it could be an aim for future studies to develop theoretical frameworks that are, perhaps, more sensitive to the particularities of sports. Methodologically, this is a field of study where different types of methods could be useful: from traditional surveys investigating people's general impressions of sports politically to more qualitative studies, looking more into the processes where sports actually are filled with more or less political meaning.

Our study covered the debate on whether the city of Oslo should make a bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics. The outcome of this debate was a victory for those in favour of Oslo making this bid: they won the referendum. The following year, leading up to the decision of whether the Parliament should provide the financial guarantee needed to proceed with the bid, ended negatively. We take this as a confirmation of the relevance of the interpretation of our data. Sports, especially elite sports coupled with actors with low political legitimacy, lack the propriety and severity to really motivate people to mobilise politically, and sports issues easily tend to drown within larger political struggles.

## Notes

1. Retriever is Norway's leading supplier of media monitoring.
2. Because the names will not make very much sense for international readers, we focus on organisational actors in these analyses.
3. In this section we describe the newspapers according to their traditional party political orientations. Research shows, however, that party political loyalties, especially among conservative papers, have weakened, so these classifications should not be emphasised too much Bjerke (2001). *Fortsatt partipresse?: norske avisers holdning til regjeringsskiftet i mars 2000* Volda: Møreforskning.
4. <http://presse.no/pfu/etiske-regler/vaer-varsom-plakaten/vvpl-engelsk/>.
5. The relationship between the city council and the city government is based on a parliamentary system.

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