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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Position, salience and rhetoric: the strategic tools employed by the main Scottish political parties in the post-devolution era

Kieran Wright[1]

Abstract

This article presents an original account of the strategic options available to political parties in the form of the position, salience and rhetoric framework. It builds upon existing accounts of party competition by conceiving of rhetorical justification as a distinct tool in the armoury of party strategists alongside the manipulation of policy position and issue salience. It applies that framework to the case of post-devolution Scotland via a quantitative text analysis of the written record of First Ministers Questions sessions in the Scottish Parliament. It shows how the main political parties in Scotland between them utilised all of the strategic tools contained within the PSR framework in the early twenty-first century up to the most recent 2021 election to the Holyrood parliament. It argues that the tactical choices the main Scottish parties made within this framework can help explain the differing electoral fortunes experienced by those parties in the post-devolution era.

Keywords Party competition · Scotland · Devolution · Rhetoric

Introduction

A large part of the purpose of researching party competition is to find out how successful parties act in particular situations so that an impression can be gained of what the optimum strategy might be for different types of party in particular sets of circumstances. Providing coherent accounts of the strategic options parties have available to them is an important element in this type of investigation. This article argues that existing theoretical frameworks of party competition focus too much on the objectives parties might pursue rather than the strategies they might adopt in pursuit of those objectives. The goals of party strategy have variously been

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characterised as ensuring the party occupies a position as close as possible to that of the median voter (Downs 1957), winning control of the executive branch of government (Riker 1962), changing public policy, securing office and winning votes (Strom and Muller 1999). Meguid's Position, Salience and Ownership framework (Meguid 2008) combined two strategic tools (manipulation of policy position and issue salience) with an account of the strategic objective of securing a long-standing reputation for credibility among voters in relation to a particular issue.

The framework presented here focuses solely on strategy rather than objectives by substituting the issue ownership element of Meguid's framework with the strategic tool of manipulating rhetorical strategy. Rhetoric is defined here as the type of language political actors use in framing their policy position and attacking that of their opponents. For example, when a political spokesperson uses terms such as "austerity", "inequality", "enterprise" or "wealth creator" they are using words and phrases that act as indicators of a general ideological leaning rather than a specific policy position, with the first two words generally seen as indicative of a left leaning stance and the latter two indicating a more right of centre one. This study argues that these types of indicators of a general set of political values rather than a specific policy stance are elements of political discourse that influence the decisions voters make about particular parties or candidates. Existing research has shown that, particularly for low information voters, what has been described as policy cues (Rabinowitz and Stuart 1989, pp. 94–95) are an important part of the process by which voters make decisions about which parties or candidates to support (Vössing et al. 2021; Williams et al 2022).

This study focuses on how political actors might deploy different rhetorical strategies in the context of stateless nations in which a significant regional nationalist party operates. In that type of setting, party competition has been characterised as operating within a twin axes model incorporating a centre-periphery axis in which parties articulate a position on the amount of political power that should be exercised at the level of the sub-state nation alongside a left–right one where they outline their position on issues such as taxation, spending, crime and healthcare (Elias et al 2015). Within that framework, parties have the option of adopting the rhetorical strategy of justifying their stance on one axis by referencing their stance on the other. This has been termed a subsuming strategy (Massetti and Schakel 2015). More specifically, parties have the option of adopting a positive subsuming strategy in which the image projected by a party is in line with its established policy identity on both axes of competition (Wright 2022, pp. 617–618). It is use of the latter rhetorical strategy by Scottish political actors that forms the focus of this study.

The study of the use of rhetorical strategies is important because there is substantial evidence to support the notion that their use can influence public opinion. The use of rhetoric justifying policy choices on moral rather than pragmatic grounds has been shown to impact upon voter behaviour (Jung 2020). For example, the type of rhetoric a US President uses in justifying a military intervention can limit the loss of popularity they experience should that intervention end in failure (Trager and Vavreck 2011). Meanwhile, use of the rhetoric of military sacrifice by minority groups, a large percentage of whom who have a record of serving in the military, can be helpful to those groups in securing equal political rights (Krebs and Jackson

2007, p. 48). In all these examples, it is the political actor's choice of rhetorical strategy as distinct from their choice of position or the relative salience they give to particular issues that appears to be the crucial factor influencing the relevant political outcome.

The research presented here tests the utility of the position, salience, rhetoric framework by using three distinct quantitative measurements of those aspects of party strategy as deployed by the three largest Scottish political parties in the 2000–2021 period. Existing data are used to measure the position element, while measurement of the salience and rhetoric aspects is conducted via the analysis of two original datasets compiled using two different methods of quantitative text analysis applied to the written record of sessions of First Minister's Questions in the Scottish Parliament.

The next section presents a detailed account of the position, salience and rhetoric framework arguing for its utility as a tool for studying party competition in any setting. Subsequent sections detail the methodology of the study, the results of the analysis, and present a discussion of those results.

The position, salience and rhetoric framework

The framework presented here provides a route by which political parties can implement several of the strategies detailed in the existing literature on party competition. One benefit of this is that it allows for the combining of the new partisan theory and agency-based approaches to the study of the topic identified in a recent review of the literature (Wenzelburger and Zohlnhofer 2021). New partisan theory was developed in response to the decline of ridged, class-based electoral cleavages in the late 20th and early twenty-first centuries which created an environment of greater electoral volatility in which parties had to quickly adapt to changing voter preferences. In such an environment, parties can be characterised more often than not as followers of public opinion (Wenzelburger and Zohlnhofer 2021, p. 1058), while an agency-based model places much more emphasis on the situations in which parties are free to project an image in line with their core values, possibly in an attempt to lead public opinion (Wenzelburger and Zohlnhofer 2021, p. 1060).

The argument is that rhetoric enables parties to choose whether to exercise agency or mirror voter preference in a wide variety of situations. This is because it allows them to alter the image they are projecting to the electorate without necessarily changing what they say about the issues (policy position) or what issues they tend to talk about (issue salience). Instead of shifting away from their core values, parties have the option of adjusting the rhetorical framing of their position in order that it might appeal to voters who are not necessarily instinctively supportive of that position.

Conceiving of rhetoric as an aspect of the message put out by political parties distinct from position and salience enables the analysis of situations where a political representative might choose to use language more usually associated with the affiliation of an opponent without a shift in policy position occurring. For example, a spokesperson for a party generally seen as occupying a left of centre stance can

sometimes utilise rhetoric more typical of a spokesperson for a right wing party if they feel it might be strategically advantageous for them to do so.

This type of disconnect between rhetoric and position might, for example, occurs because it provides a route by which parties can implement what has been referred to as a "blurring" strategy in which its true policy identity is rendered opaque (Rovny 2013, p. 6). Alternatively, the party might want to project multiple identities in the hope of appealing simultaneously to different groups of voters with diverse views. This has been termed a broad appeal strategy in which the various strategic tools at a party's disposal are used to project different policy identities aimed at different groups of voters (Somer-Topcu 2015, p. 842). Both of these strategic options can be implemented by a party employing rhetoric redolent of different policy stances simultaneously, or by adjusting the type of rhetoric used when addressing different audiences in different settings. This study argues that it is difficult to say precisely how a party might implement a strategy of this type without the capacity to manipulate rhetoric rather than position or issue salience.

Post-Stokes (1963) literature on party competition has incorporated a distinction between valence and non-valence issues, with the former encompassing topics where the ultimate objectives of policy are widely shared by politicians and people. On valence issues parties compete to convince voters that it is they rather than their opponents that are best placed to achieve a shared goal, such as being the party most likely to reduce crime rates or the one that has the most competent leadership team. How parties go about making a valence-based appeal is likely to vary on the basis of party type. Political parties need to overcome any existing negative perceptions voters might have with regard to their valence credentials. How parties go about achieving a valence-based advantage will be a response to their judgement as to where their existing valence disadvantage lies. For example, a party of the left might need to overcome negative voter perception of their ability to manage the economy and tax revenue in a responsible manner, while a party of the right might need to reassure voters that it can be trusted with maintaining the welfare system and public services to acceptable standards.

There may also be some strategic tools used in the pursuit of a valence advantage that are common to all party types. There exists some evidence demonstrating that the closer a voter is to a party's ideological stance the more likely the voter is to perceive that party as being competent (Sanders et al 2011; Zacharova and Warwick 2014). This message is reinforced by research showing that the perception among voters that a party holds an extreme position on the left–right axis of competition negatively effects voter perception of that party's level of competence (Johns and Kölln 2019). This study argues that this creates a general incentive for all parties who want to appear competent to reduce their use of rhetoric redolent of the extremes of a relevant axis of competition while not necessarily adopting a less extreme policy position. In a similar way, parties who want to overcome existing negative voter perceptions of their valence credentials might choose to adjust the rhetoric they use in order that they sound more like their opponents who are not encumbered with the same negative perception. A similar strategy could allow parties to address what has been termed low yield issues where there exists a gap between the policy preferences of their support base and the wider electorate (De

Sio and Weber 2014). Rhetoric could be used to project an image closer to the policy preference of the voters, while the policy position still satisfies the party's core support base.

In providing a mechanism by which parties can adjust the image they project to the electorate without shifting policy position, conceiving of rhetoric as a distinct strategic tool also acknowledges the constraints political parties face in terms of their ability to change many elements of their policy platform. Most political parties have core issues that define the party's identity where a shift in policy stance would be problematic. These constraints are arguably less important with regard to the manipulation of issue salience by parties. While a party's support base might be reluctant to accept the abandonment of a policy commitment based upon its core identity or ideological stance, it might well be willing to accept a downward shift in the salience of that policy area if felt that would be a tactically advantageous option to take. A shift in issue salience will not fundamentally challenge a party's core identity in the way that a shift in policy would. Moreover, a party cannot shift policy position too often without damaging its long-term credibility with voters.

The theory presented here goes on to argue that parties have even more freedom to make different strategic choices with regard to changes in the party's rhetoric than is the case with either the policy position or salience aspect of their strategy. Use of particular rhetorical strategies can be carefully calibrated to appeal to particular audiences at particular times or even different audiences at the same time. The rise in the importance of social media platforms that enable micro-targeting has made the latter type of tactic easier to employ than ever before. The same is the case to an extent with regard to salience, but not with respect to policy position. True, a party can take up a position that is obscured via the blurring strategy referred to above, but the true position behind the blurring is itself not open to ambiguity.

In summation, this article argues that the position, salience and rhetoric framework provides an account of the strategic options available to parties that enables them to implement a blurring or broad appeal strategy, and provides a way they can deal with low yield issues, or those where their opponents enjoy a valence advantage. It also incorporates the idea that there might be situations where a party is unable or unwilling to shift position, or manipulate issue salience, but may be free to adjust its rhetoric.

Methods

One difficulty in applying the PSR framework to a case study is that the total number of different rhetorical strategies available to political actors is huge. The previous section has highlighted some examples, but a study of the type presented here is inevitably limited in terms of the range of different rhetorical strategies it is able to investigate, hence the decision to focus on a single type of rhetorical strategy in a particular type of case.

A case in which party competition takes place within the twin axes model, where parties have the option of deploying the subsuming strategy discussed above, is useful for testing the utility of the framework presented because it makes it possible to

study one specific way in which a party might deploy the rhetoric aspect of the PSR framework; namely the positive subsuming strategy in which the image projected by a party is in line with its established policy identity on both axes of competition (Wright 2022, pp. 617–618).

Examples of subsuming can be highlighted in the written record of First Minister's Questions sessions in the Scottish Parliament that forms the focus of this study. In one session in 2014, then opposition leader and Labour MSP Johann Lamont as part of an attack on the Scottish National Party administration's record on state funded healthcare provision asked SNP First Minister Alex Salmond "is it not the case that the First Minister cares more about the constitution of our country than the health of our people?" (SP OR May 8th 2014 Col 30,723), while 2017 saw Salmond's successor as First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, condemn "Westminster austerity" (SP OR September 7th 2017 Col 9). In both of these examples, the argument that the government is not providing adequate public service provision (a frequent theme of left of centre party discourse) is coupled with a reference to the relevant party's stance on the constitutional question. While Lamont characterises the SNP's focus on their ultimate goal of Scottish independence as a damaging distraction preventing the SNP administration delivering quality public services, Sturgeon argues that any underfunding of public services is due to austerity policies imposed on Scotland by Westminster, the implication being that independence offers Scotland a route out of austerity.

Both these examples constitute instances of positive subsuming as the representatives are combining language redolent of the established left leaning identity of their party with that indicative of a pro-independence position in the case of the SNP and an anti-independence one in the case of Labour. The study that introduced the concept of positive subsuming shows how Scottish Labour in the first decade of the twenty-first century shifted strategy from an approach centred around justifying its opposition to independence on ideological or cultural grounds to one that increasingly highlighted the economic downsides of Scotland leaving the UK (Wright 2022, p. 626). This article argues that this change in approach cannot credibly be described as a shift in policy position or issue salience; rather it represents an adjustment in rhetorical justification. This demonstrates the utility of studying party competition using a framework that distinguishes between those three strategic tools.

The framework presented here was applied to the chosen case study using three separate methods to measure the three components of the PSR framework. In order to measure policy position on the left–right and centre-periphery axes, data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al 2022) are used. In that survey, expert respondents are specifically asked to plot the position of parties on each axis by rating them on a 0–10 scale. For the left–right axis, 0 constitutes extreme left, while 10 is extreme right. On the centre-periphery axis, 0 indicates strong support for political decentralisation, while 10 indicates strong opposition.

Isolating and measuring the rhetoric aspect of party discourse is far from being a straightforward process. Most political texts will contain a mixture of statements of policy position and rhetorical devices aimed at justifying that position, or attacking that of an opponent. However, this study argues that astute selection of the text being analysed can make it more likely than not that any quantitative measurement

of party strategy derived from that text is a result of the rhetorical strategy deployed by political actors rather than statements of policy position. Recent research has shown that party representatives are particularly likely to deploy emotive rhetoric in the context of high profile parliamentary question and answer sessions (Osnabrügge et al 2021). The written record of sessions of this type is therefore well suited to being used as an indicator of rhetoric as a distinct element in party strategy. The expectation is that while party representatives may sometimes state a specific policy position the vast majority of words spoken will be the kind of generalised statements aimed at justifying that position, or attacking that of their political opponents, envisaged in the working definition of rhetoric outlined above.

With this in mind, the framework set out above was applied to the written record of First Minister's Questions sessions in the Scottish Parliament that took place in the 2000–2021 period. What party representatives say in these sessions provides a good indicator of the general image they are seeking to project to the electorate at any one time. Although the content of parliamentary debates is for the most part not consumed by the general public, political ideas discussed in parliament are circulated by the mass media, thus having an impact upon the wider political world (Bayley 2004, p. 12). There is evidence to suggest that over a century and a half ago parliamentary actors understood that they were communicating their ideas to the wider electorate as much as they were communicating them to their colleagues and rivals in parliament. Ministerial speeches in the UK House of Commons began to utilise less sophisticated language in the years after the UK electorate was substantially expanded by the passing of the 1867 Reform Act, indicating that even way before the advent of electronic media parliamentary actors endeavoured to ensure that they were projecting an image that was intelligible to the wider electorate (Spirling 2016).

Question time sessions of this type have been shown to have an effect on the wider population in promoting higher levels of political knowledge, partisanship, and turnout (Salmond 2014). Moreover, recent evidence from the Netherlands demonstrates how parties use question sessions as strategic tools (Otjes and Louwerse 2018, p. 509). Parties use parliamentary debates as a forum in which to express their ideological identity (De Saint-Laurent 2015, p. 45), and party elites spend significant amounts of time preparing for sessions of that type in the expectation of using them to project a particular image to the electorate (Hazarika and Hamilton 2018, p. 47).

The parliamentary setting also has the advantage of being one where it is possible to analyse the strategic choices parties make in the same setting over a considerable period of time, incorporating both the election and the inter-election phases of party competition. This desire to analyse a large sample of political discourse covering a substantial period also led to the decision to use an automated method of text analysis rather than a more time consuming and labour-intensive method such as manual coding.

The method of quantitative text analysis utilised is cosine document similarity. This is a way of generating a quantitative measurement of the relative levels of similarity of a set of documents that is independent of document length (Bohlat et al. 2015, pp. 9–10, Martoccia Diodati et al. 2018, p. 524). It has for some time

been a common method used in the field of information retrieval (McGill and Salton 1983), and has been used as the basis of many internet search engines by providing a method of determining which web pages have the greatest level of similarity with a particular search query. The method uses the tf-idf (term frequency-inverse document frequency) weighting of each word within each document. This process gives greater weight to terms that appear frequently in some documents but infrequently in others on the grounds that they are likely to be the ones indicative of how similar a set of documents are (Bholat et al 2015, p. 9). Thus, rather than giving equal weight to all words in a set of documents, tf-idf directs focus towards those that distinguish one document from another. The method would, for example, not classify documents on the topic of modern warfare as being similar to ones discussing keeping tropical fish as pets because both include frequent use of the word "tank" as the word would not be useful in distinguishing between the documents. The similarity rating would instead be a result of the other terms in the text that did highlight the level of difference between them.

The measure of cosine document similarity has been used successfully in other studies to measure policy distance between political actors via the analysis of parliamentary discourse (Martoccia Diodati et al. 2018, O'Grady 2019). The ability of the method to measure policy distance means that it can also be used to scale documents between two reference texts that represent different sides of a particular axis of competition and thereby generate a set of quantitative measurements of party strategy based on the extent to which the language used is redolent of one side of the relevant axis. This is the approach adopted in this study.

Ideally reference texts used to scale other documents should be selected on the basis of existing empirical data where possible. With that in mind the reference texts used to measure the extent to which party representatives employed rhetoric redolent of the left or right of the left–right axis were UK Westminster election manifestos from the period studied chosen on the basis of the left–right ratings given to them by the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al 2022). The rationale behind using election manifestos is that while they in part constitute statements of policy position they also incorporate rhetorical justification of that position. They can therefore be used as indicators of the type of language political parties in a particular context use when projecting an identity closely associated with one side of a particular axis of competition. The idea behind using Westminster manifestos to scale the language used by Holyrood politicians is that the documents used for scaling should be generally representative of the language used by political actors in the UK, but that they should not have been produced in the specific context that forms the focus of the study.

Legitimate questions can be raised regarding the use of the Manifesto Project ratings to select suitable documents. The rationale behind this choice is that manifestos coded by the project represent one of very few available sources of documents that have had a quantitative measurement of their ideological orientation relevant to this study applied to them. Moreover, one of the main criticisms levelled at the ratings (that they make questionable assertions about the movement of political parties on ideological axes from election to election (Slapin and Proksch 2008, p. 716) is much less relevant when they are being used to select individual documents with

a particularly pronounced ideological orientation rather than to track party strategy over time.

The reference text used to measure the use of left wing rhetoric incorporated the Green Party manifesto from the 2017 UK general election and the Labour manifesto from the 2019 election as they are the two most left wing manifestos produced in the UK context in the twenty-first century according to the Manifesto Project ratings. To measure use of right wing rhetoric, a reference text made up of the 2001 United Kingdom Independence Party manifesto (the most right wing UK manifesto published since 1945) and the Conservative manifesto from 2010 (the most right wing Conservative manifesto of the twenty-first century) was used.

To measure the extent to which parties employed pro-centre or pro-periphery rhetoric documents from the period studied that in their entirety constitute examples of the main Scottish political parties stating and justifying a pro-centre or pro-periphery case were selected. It was felt that contrary to the choice made when deciding how to measure left–right rhetoric that the documents used for centre-periphery scaling had to be ones produced in the context of the case being analysed. Much of the language used by political actors operating within a centre-periphery axis of competition is likely to be peculiar to that context to the extent that using documents produced in another setting would undermine the analysis.

To that end, the document published by the Scottish Government setting out the case for Scottish independence in the run up to the 2014 referendum (Scottish Government 2014) was chosen as part of the pro-periphery reference text, along with the extracted sections of all SNP manifestos published in the twenty-first century that argued for an explicit pro-periphery position.

For the pro-centre reference texts, two speeches by then UK Prime Minister David Cameron (Dearden 2014) and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown (Mudie 2014) made in support of maintaining the union in the course of the 2014 independence referendum campaign were used along with an example of campaign literature published by the pro-union campaign (Better Together 2014). The pro-centre reference text therefore incorporated examples of language used by parties on the left and right of the left–right axis in justifying a pro-centre position.

The written record of all FMQs sessions that took place in the Scottish Parliament from when the first session of that type took place in 2000 up to the 2021 Holyrood election was divided into four quarters for each year. The text for each quarter was then divided up on the basis of the party affiliation of the person speaking. This process resulted in the compilation of a total of 255 documents, 85 for each of the three main Scottish political parties containing their contributions to FMQs sessions from 2000 to 2020 inclusive, plus the early part of 2021 prior to that year's Scottish Parliament election. Using the R software environment, the cosine similarity of each document with the left, right, pro-centre and pro-periphery reference texts was calculated. Net right scores were calculated by subtracting the cosine similarity of each document with the left reference text from the equivalent figure for the right reference text to give a net right rating. To obtain a net pro-periphery score, the cosine similarity of each document and the pro-centre reference text was subtracted from the equivalent figure for the pro-periphery reference text.

Positive subsuming scores were obtained by combining the similarity score for the set of documents relating to each party's established identity on one axis with that relating to its identity on the other. The SNP's positive subsuming score was calculated by adding the similarity rating for each document containing that party's contributions with the left reference text with the equivalent rating for the pro-periphery reference text. Similarly, the Conservative's positive subsuming rating is the sum of the cosine similarity of the words spoken by its representatives with the right reference text with the equivalent figure for the pro-centre reference text. Labour's positive subsuming score meanwhile was calculated by adding their similarity scores with the left reference text to the equivalent figure for the pro-centre text.

Prior to conducting the main analysis, the method employed to measure the rhetoric element was validated using a set of texts to which existing left, right, pro-centre and pro-periphery ratings have been applied via manual coding by the Manifesto Project and the Regional Manifesto Project (Gomez et al. 2016). The objective was to test the ability of the method used in this study to detect the use of language relating to each side of the two axes of competition in texts produced by UK parties other than those included in the main analysis, and in parts of the UK other than Scotland. The method designed to detect left–right orientation was applied to all UK general election manifestos produced in the twenty-first century by parties other than Labour, the SNP or the Conservatives that have been given a left–right rating by the Manifesto Project. The method was therefore applied to a total of 16 manifestos, 6 published by the Liberal Democrats, 3 each published by Plaid Cymru and the Democratic Unionist Party and 2 each published by the Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

The Manifesto Project ratings do not incorporate a specific centre-periphery element, so in order to test the method for measuring that aspect of party strategy documents rated on that axes by the Regional Manifesto Project were used. Again, the objective was to test the method outside the Scottish context and on documents produced by parties not included in the main study. However, the RMP has only coded 6 documents that fit both of those criteria; the 5 manifestos produced by the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru for elections to what became the Senedd Cymru between 1999 and 2016 and the UKIP manifesto for the 2016 Senedd contest. It was therefore decided to also include the 5 manifestos produced by Welsh Labour for Senedd elections that took place during the same period in order that the test of the method was as thorough as possible while still mostly utilising documents produced by parties not included in the main analysis.

The same method that generated net right and net pro-periphery ratings using the written record of FMQs sessions was applied to the two sets of manifestos detailed above. Then, bivariate OLS regression was used to test for a correlation between the measurements of party strategy generated for this study and the equivalent ones generated via manual coding by the Manifesto Project and its regional equivalent. Validating methods of automated text analysis by comparing their output with the output of human coding of the same documents is one approach advocated in the general literature on this type of methodology (Grimmer and Stewart 2013, p. 271).

To apply the salience aspect of the PSR framework, it was decided to focus on the relative emphasis each party gave to the constitutional question. This measure was taken by conducting a simple count of the words "independence" and "devolution" within each document. The measurement is expressed as a percentage of the total number of words in each document in order that it is independent of document length.

Each set of measurements of the salience and rhetoric aspects of party strategy was used as the input to two sets of bivariate OLS regression analyses. The measures of position were not analysed in this way due to the much smaller number of available measurements of this variable. The first set of regression analyses aimed to ascertain whether the measurements of rhetoric had indeed identified significant differences in the strategy each party pursued over the entirety of the period studied. All 255 net right, pro-periphery, salience and positive subsuming measurements were used as dependent variables. A set of dummy variables indicating the party affiliation of the speakers whose words each document contained were applied to that complete set of scores as independent variables.

The aim of the second regression analysis was to assess the extent to which any of the parties significantly adjusted their strategy using the strategic tools outlined in the PSR framework over the course of 2000–2021. In that analysis, each quarter was numbered sequentially and used as an independent variable in a set of bivariate regression models where each party's set of net right, pro-periphery, salience and positive subsuming scores served as dependent variables.

Results and analysis

Table 1 details the results of the validation test of the cosine similarity method. Significant positive correlations are shown between the net right and net pro-periphery ratings generated by the method developed for this study and the equivalent ratings generated by the manual coding of the same documents. This provides evidence to support the notion that the method of measuring rhetorical strategy adopted by this study is able to capture instances of UK parties using language redolent of the left, right, pro-centre and pro-periphery sides of the twin axes of competition in cases outside the Scottish context and in documents produced by parties other than those included in the main study. Moreover, although the correlations shown are significant they are far from perfect, suggesting that the method utilised is capturing a

Table 1 Validation tests of cosine similarity method using documents coded manually by the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al. 2022) and the Regional Manifesto Project (Gomez et al. 2016)

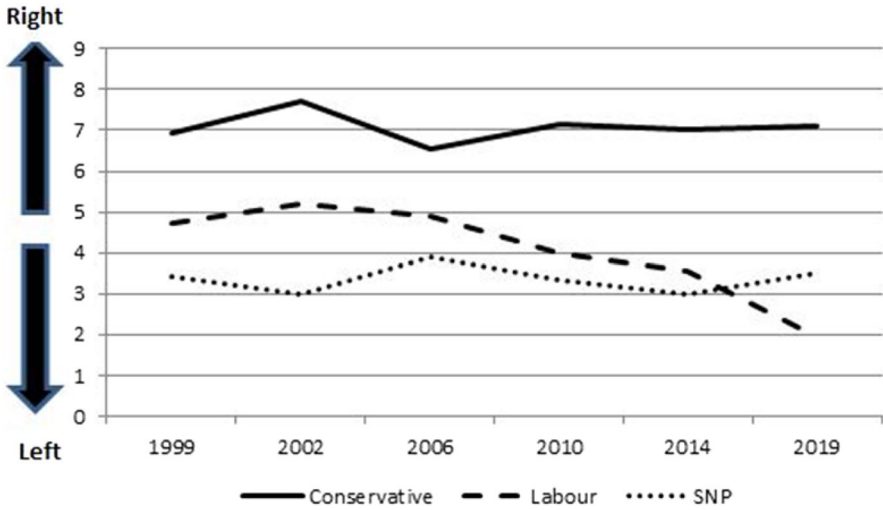| Independent/dependent variable	Standardised Beta Coefficient	R squared	P value	N
Net right/Manifesto Project Rile	0.6247	0.39	0.010*	16
Net Pro-periphery/Regional Manifesto Project centre-periphery	0.720	0.518	0.013*	11

Fig. 1 Positioning of the main Scottish political parties on 0–10 left–right scale using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al. 2022)
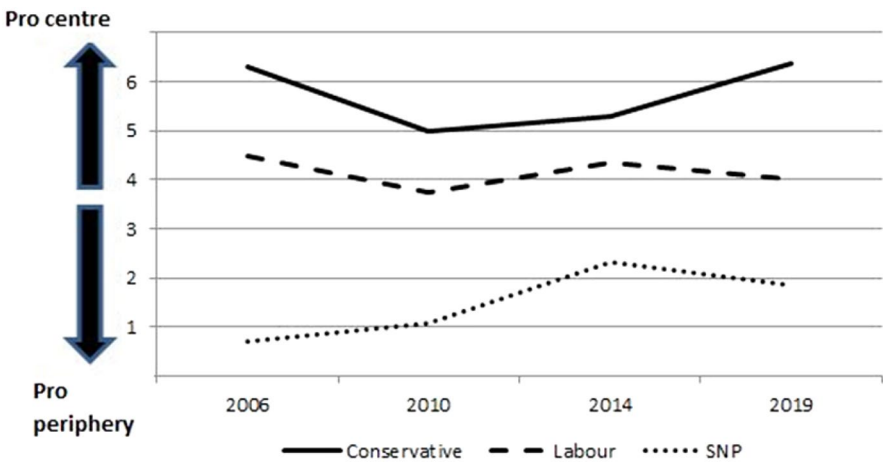

Fig. 2 Positioning of the main Scottish political parties on 0–10 periphery-centre scale using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al. 2022)

different aspect of the image projected by political parties to that presented in the Manifesto Project and RMP ratings.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 track the changes in party strategy over the course of the period studied. Comparing the measurements of party positioning in Figs. 1 and 2 with those for rhetoric in Figs. 4 and 5, it is clear that the positioning aspect of the image a party projects is by far the more stable indicator of the two. All parties maintain a similar position relative to each other on both axes of competition
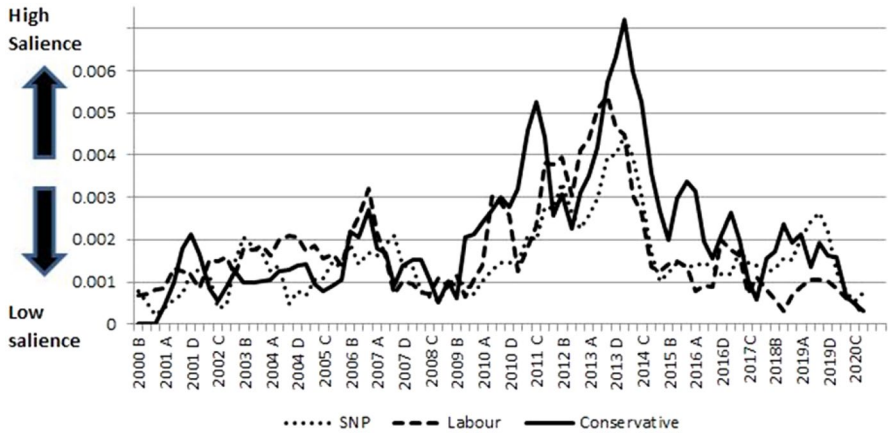
Fig. 3 Salience of the constitutional issue in contributions to FMQs sessions 2000–2021
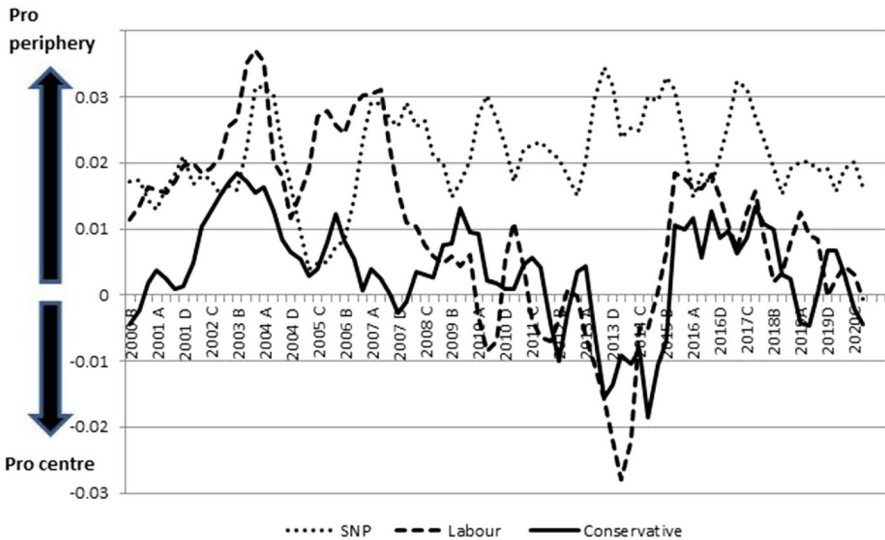

Fig. 4 Use of pro-periphery rhetoric in FMQs sessions 2000–2021

throughout the period studied with one exception with Labour being replaced by the SNP as the most left wing of the main Scottish parties between the 2014 and 2019 Chapel Hill surveys. The evident stability of the measurements of party positioning means that the absence of CHES centre-periphery ratings for the 1999 and 2002 surveys is not too much of a concern. Those scores that are available cover three quarters of the period studied and it is unlikely that ratings for the early years of the twenty-first century would have differed significantly from those that are available.

Perhaps a more legitimate concern regarding the CHES data is that the stability the ratings display might at least partly be a reflection of the methodology
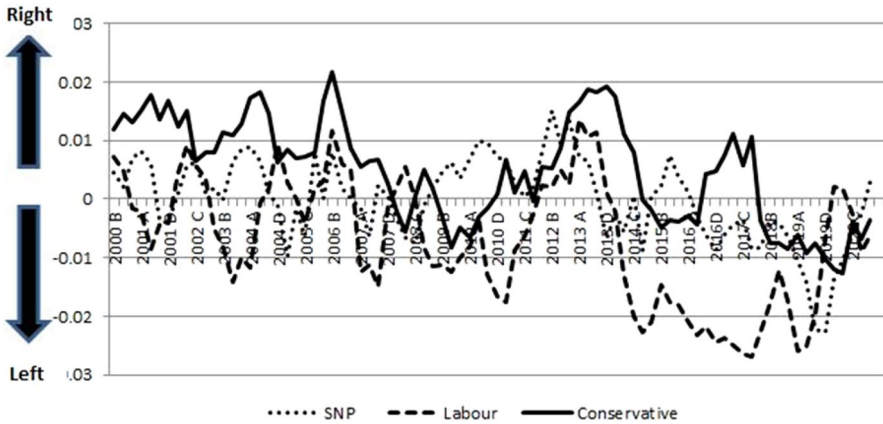
Fig. 5 Net right rhetoric scores for SNP, Labour and the Conservatives 2000–2021 based on contributions to FMQs sessions 2000–2021
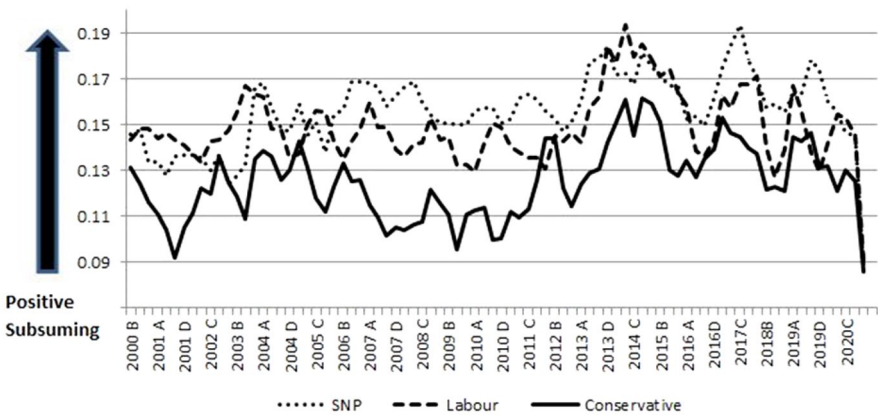

Fig. 6 Positive subsuming scores for SNP, Labour and the Conservatives 2000–2021 based on contributions to FMQs sessions 2000–2021

behind them. Expert ratings are likely to be heavily influenced by long-standing perceptions of party identity that experts may be loath to revise in response to current events. That said if a party does make a concerted effort to shift position it is legitimate to expect that the CHES ratings will pick up on that.

It is the case that the methods employed to measure each aspect of party strategy resulted in far more measures of rhetoric than position being taken, but the fact that there are far more instances of parties outflanking one another in terms of rhetoric than there are of crossover in party position should still be seen as significant. It is an indication that, as anticipated, the rhetorical aspect of a party's image is more variable than the positional.

A clear pattern can be seen in Fig. 3 detailing the relative salience the parties gave to the constitutional issue. On this measure, the parties seem to have adopted a very similar strategy with a gradual increase in salience in the lead up to the 2014 independence referendum followed by a post-referendum decline.

As might be expected, Fig. 4 shows that for the majority of the period, the SNP was the most frequent user of pro-periphery rhetoric of the three parties studied with the Conservatives the least. Labour's strategy undergoes a distinct shift around the time the party lost power at Holyrood to the SNP in early 2007. Prior to that point the party is seen to frequently employ rhetoric almost as pro-periphery as that of the SNP. After the party lost power that ceases to be the case as part of a widening divide between the SNP and its two main opponents on this measure in the lead up to the 2014 independence referendum.

There are a couple of possible explanations for this in addition to a deliberate desire on the part of Labour to distance themselves from their main opponent. In the early years of the post-devolution era, Labour might well have felt the need to proclaim the positive aspects of the devolution settlement it had introduced leading party representatives to frequently employ pro-periphery language. There may also be an element of an incumbency effect in which representatives of a governing party tend to use what might be described as 'pro-Scottish' (and therefore pro-periphery) language simply because they draw attention to Scottish success stories that occur under their party's stewardship. This also needs to be borne in mind when interpreting the results relating to the SNP.

Figures 5 and 6 detail the evolution of party rhetoric on the left–right axis and their relative use of a positive subsuming strategy. Overall, the most left wing scores are generated by documents containing the words spoken by Labour MSPs and the most right wing by the equivalent Conservative documents. For the majority of the period, the SNP seems to have occupied a space somewhere between those two parties on that measure. Figure 5 shows that for most of the period studied, the SNP was the party most likely to pursue a positive subsuming strategy and the Conservatives the least.

Table 2 details the results of the first set of regression analyses. The dummy party variables are shown to have a significant correlation with almost all the measurements of party strategy providing evidence to support the notion that those measurements are indeed capturing the differences in party strategy. There are however two exceptions. No significant correlation is shown between the SNP variable and the net right variable, while there is also no significant correlation between the Labour variable and the complete set of pro-periphery scores. On this evidence using rhetoric clearly redolent of one side of either of these axes of coopetition did not form a consistent feature of either party's strategy over the entirety of the period studied.

There are significant correlations between the Labour and Conservative variables and the net right variable, with that correlation being negative in the case of the former and positive for the latter. A similarly clear contrast is evident with regard to centre-periphery rhetoric with the SNP variable showing a significant positive correlation with the pro-periphery variable and the Conservative variable showing a significant negative one.

Table 2 Differences in party strategy over the entire period studied (2000–2021)

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Beta coefficient	*P* value	*R* Squared
SNP	Net Right	0.001	0.554	0.001
Labour		− 0.009	0.001**	0.111
Conservative		0.008	0.001**	0.088
SNP	Pro-periphery	0.014	0.001**	0.216
Labour		0.005	0.242	0.005
Conservative		− 0.012	0.001**	0.153
SNP	Salience	0.008	0.023*	0.020
Labour		0.018	0.001**	0.112
Conservative		− 0.025	0.001**	0.228
SNP	Positive Subsuming	0.019	0.001**	0.127
Labour		0.008	0.013*	0.024
Conservative		− 0.027	0.001**	0.261

Each row refers to a separate bivariate regression model. *N* for all models—255

The SNP is seen as the party most likely to pursue a positive subsuming strategy with the relevant dummy variable showing a significant positive correlation with that measurement. This appears to be the main feature of the SNP's strategy that distinguishes it from that of its opponents along with the fact that (as shown in Table 3) it became more likely to employ that rhetorical strategy with the passage of time. These conclusions build upon existing work showing that focussing solely on independence for the most part did not form the main aspect of SNP strategy. That research highlights fostering an image as a competent government as a more important objective (Johns et al. 2013; Carmen et al. 2014; McAngus 2015, p. 642;

Table 3 Changes in party strategy over the course of the 2000–2021 period

Dependent variable	Beta coefficient	*P* value	*R* Squared
SNP Right	− 0.000135	0.006*	0.088
Labour Right	− 0.000228	0.000***	0.177
Conservative Right	− 0.000219	0.000***	0.205
SNP Pro-periphery	0.000059	0.176	0.022
Labour Pro-periphery	− 0.000265	0.000***	0.171
Conservative Pro-periphery	− 0.000079	0.086	0.035
SNP Salience	0.000128	0.136	0.027
Labour Salience	− 0.000075	0.453	0.007
Conservative Salience	0.000356	0.000***	0.152
SNP Positive Subsuming	0.000319	0.000***	0.150
Labour Positive Subsuming	0.000121	0.196	0.020
Conservative Positive Subsuming	0.000263	0.007**	0.084

Each row refers to a separate bivariate regression model in which the numbered quarter of the year each measurement was taken is the independent variable. *N* for all models—85

Elias et al. 2019, p. 8). The results presented here suggest that the SNP mostly did not place a greater emphasis on the constitutional issue relative to its opponents, but when it did raise that topic it was more likely than Labour to justify its stance on that issue using language redolent of its established, left of centre identity.

There is other evidence to support the findings of this study suggesting that the SNP increased its use of a positive subsuming strategy over the course of the period studied. Analysis of the TV debates that took place during the 2015 UK general election shows SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon focussing on austerity and the constitutional issue to a greater extent than any of the other party leaders other than the Welsh regional nationalist Plaid Cymru leader Nathalie Bennett (Allen et al. 2017, pp. 815–816). This indicator of a positive subsuming strategy contrasts with the message evident in the party's election manifestos from the earlier post-devolution era in which it deployed the right-leaning justification for its stance on the constitutional question that independence would provide the government of an independent Scotland with the freedom to cut taxes. Those published for the 2003 and 2007 Scottish Parliament elections and the 2005 and 2010 Westminster elections promised that there would be lower taxes levied on businesses in an independent Scotland (SNP 2003, p. 4, SNP 2005, p. 6, SNP 2007, p. 21, SNP 2010, p. 11). Positive references to low taxation have not been repeated in later SNP manifestos.

The SNP experienced a high degree of electoral success during the period studied increasing its share of the constituency vote in elections to the Scottish Parliament in every contest that took place during that time. Between the 2010 and 2015 Westminster elections, it is more than doubled its share of the vote and gained over 50 seats. Subsequent Westminster elections have seen the party fall short of attaining that level of support, but still easily winning a majority of Scottish constituencies. This suggests that regional nationalist parties that adopt the strategic approach followed by the SNP can expect to reap electoral rewards. Existing research does indeed show that regional nationalist parties benefit from diversifying their appeal beyond the centre-periphery axis (Bergman and Flatt 2020). The rhetorical strategy of positive subsuming provides a route by which that goal can be accomplished.

The finding evident in Table 2 that the Scottish Conservatives projected an identity clearly more right wing and less pro-periphery than their opponents is unsurprising. Over the entirety of the period studied, the party is also seen to be less likely to focus on the constitutional issue, and to employ a positive subsuming strategy. Like the SNP the party performed better electorally during the latter part of the period studied becoming the second largest party in the Scottish Parliament having previously been only the third largest. This study argues that the key to explaining why that happened is the shifts party strategy underwent over the course of that period. The results presented in Table 3 show that the over the course of the period studied the party significantly increased the salience of the centre-periphery axis and became more likely to utilise a positive subsuming strategy. It has long been the case that in Scotland a right of centre political platform has had little electoral appeal unless it was combined with unionism, and that across the wider UK unionism historically played a key role in mobilising the right-leaning sections of the electorate in the decades after the introduction of a mass franchise (Dyer 2001, pp. 40–46).

The examples of the SNP and the Scottish Conservatives demonstrate that one thing that matters strategically for parties operating in a setting where the twin axes model of party competition exists is projecting a clear identity in relation to both axes. This involves not merely adopting a clear policy position on both axes, but also using the rhetoric element of the PSR framework to blend the varying justifications for each stance on each axis into a coherent whole.

This study is in agreement with earlier studies (Wright 2022) that Scottish Labour's failure to utilise positive subsuming to the extent that its two main opponents did is the key to understanding the party's poor recent electoral performance, and in particular the loss of the party's erstwhile heartlands to the SNP. Although Table 2 shows a significant positive correlation between the Labour variable and the measurement of positive subsuming, it is smaller than the equivalent figure for the SNP and the Conservatives.

On this evidence, the SNP was better than Labour at utilising positive subsuming, meaning that it gave a clearer account as to why voters who support left of centre policies should also support the SNP's stance on the constitutional question. There is evidence to suggest that Labour realised this and tried to remedy the situation part way through the 2014 independence referendum campaign (White 2015, p. 107). Arguably this shift in strategy came too late, as evidenced by the regression results in Table 3 showing no significant correlation between the time variable and the party's positive subsuming score. If there was eventually an attempt by Labour to shift towards matching the SNP on positive subsuming then it is not evident in the data analysed here.

By the time of the referendum, the SNP had successfully been utilising positive subsuming for several years, while Labour had if anything engaged in form of negative subsuming. Other research has documented that when the party did choose to address the constitutional issue in the years immediately after it lost power at Holyrood it made much of the economic case against Scottish independence, an approach that led it to utilise rhetoric redolent of the right of the left–right axis (Wright 2022, pp. 626–627). This provides a good indication as to why the strategic gap between Labour and the SNP evident in the quantitative measure of positive subsuming is evident in the results presented here.

There is some evidence that these differences in the strategy pursued by Labour and the SNP had some impact on public opinion. Data from the British Election Study shows that Scottish voters up until 2014 viewed Labour as the most left wing of the main Scottish parties, but by the following year were of the opinion that the SNP occupied that position (Fieldhouse 2014 a and b, Fieldhouse 2015). This study argues that the latter's greater willingness to utilise positive subsuming provides one explanation for that shift. The SNP was more clearly articulating the means by which it could actually implement left of centre policies, by winning the fight for Scottish independence. To be in a position to fully implement left wing policies, Labour would have to beat the Tories at UK level, while the task for the SNP was to win Scotland and win an independence referendum. After the Conservatives came to power at UK level as part of the 2010 Coalition Government (subsequently becoming the sole party of government from 2015), Labour

struggled to beat the SNP because significant numbers of left leaning Scottish voters concluded that the latter was a more realistic prospect than the former.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the utility of the PSR framework, but also pointed to some of its limitations. Applying the framework necessitates a clear pre-existing idea of what type of rhetorical strategies is likely to be evident in the text under analysis. The researcher then needs to find a way of determining the extent to which those strategies are being utilised at any one time by particular actors. Prior research on cases where a significant regional nationalist party operates enabling the use of the twin axes model and the phenomenon of positive subsuming created an opening for the type of analysis presented here, but this may not always be available.

Moreover, isolating and measuring the rhetoric element of political discourse is a far from straightforward process as the three elements in the PSR framework are inevitably interlinked. The net right, pro-periphery and positive subsuming ratings that form the rhetoric part of the analysis will inevitably be influenced by statements of position, and by issue salience, as well as by the elements of rhetoric outlined above. This is the case even though focus on high profile parliamentary question and answer sessions might maximise the impact of rhetoric as opposed to more policy focussed statements. This lack of precision is an inherent feature of the automated analysis of a large body of text such as the analysis of over twenty years of weekly parliamentary question and answer sessions. More labour-intensive methods, such as manual coding, on the other hand inevitably limit the amount of text that can be analysed. A mixed method approach may well be the way forward with a more qualitative analysis used to highlight different rhetorical strategies, the results of which can then be used to inform the design of research using automated or semi-automated quantitative methods.

Whatever method is used this study has demonstrated that rhetoric is a distinct element in party strategy, and that studying political actor's relative use of different rhetorical strategies can help provide evidence as to what the optimum overall strategy for a political party in a particular situation might be.

Voters who perceive parties to be very close together on a particular axis of competition are more likely to consider switching their vote between the two from election to election. In a scenario where voters feel there is little to choose between two parties in terms of policy position, rhetorical strategy is likely to be a particularly important factor in voter decision-making. Evidence from the middle of the period studied here suggests that Scottish voters did indeed view Labour and the SNP as occupying a similar position on the left of the left–right axis (Carmen et al. 2014, p. 94). In that situation the party that employed the more left leaning set of rhetorical justifications for its stance on the constitutional issue was always going to be well placed to win support from the other.

Of course, there is an inherent difficulty in establishing whether party strategy is influencing public opinion or vice versa in any given situation. This study did not incorporate a measurement of public opinion into its core analysis, but a future

study could do that. Having established the value of looking at rhetoric as a distinct element in party strategy future work on the interaction between rhetoric and public opinion would make a valuable contribution to the literature on party competition.

Data availability The data supporting the findings of this study is available from the author upon reasonable request.

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