

THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE FOR VOLUNTARY SPORTS CLUBS IN ENGLAND

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Introduction

Sports volunteers in England are increasingly performing multifaceted roles as increasingly voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) become instrumental to the delivery of British sports policy. Sports volunteering and the voluntary sports movement in England provide a huge potential resource of social, technical, economic and intellectual capital. This resource has slowly but surely come under the spotlight of the New Labour British government, a government that the Prime Minister Tony Blair himself has labelled as pragmatist and utilitarian (Blair, 1998).

This paper uses a political process approach born out of movement theory that is predicated on the notion that political context can be translated into a Political Opportunity Structure (POS) which allows for the systematic analysis of the political context (Kriesi, 1995). The POS essentially refers to the problem of political opportunities and constraints that operate temporally and spatially within any particular system (Tarrow, 1996). Thus, the focus of this paper is to contextualise the relationship that VSCs have to the political structure thereby illuminating the extent to which that relationship can facilitate or impede their operation and development.

Structure as opposed to agency is the focus of the POS, in that actors at any one time have to take the POS in which they are operating as a 'given' (Kriesi, 1995). This position therefore portrays the relationship between structure and agency as dialectical. Given this position there are three broad sets of properties of the POS that will form the focus of analysis when examining the relationship of the political context to the operation of VSCs in England. These are: its formal institutional structure, its informal procedures and prevailing strategies, and the configuration of power.

These three properties allow an analysis of three key issues: first a greater analysis of the formal relationship between government and VSCs is possible; second an examination of the informal manner and nature of VSC-key sport agency interaction is made possible; third the distributional arrangement of power; the relations between VSCs and the government, and the extent of their embeddedness is highlighted (Maloney et al, 2000).

Given that currently sports volunteering accounts for 28% of all volunteering activity in the UK, with 15% of all UK adults volunteering for sport (Taylor et al, 2003), the majority of which takes place in the 151,000 sports clubs in the UK: The purpose of this paper at this particular juncture is to ask two questions;

- How, and to what extent have VSCs become shaped by the specific political context within which they operate?
- What, if any, is the potential impact of such a political context for the institution of the VSC itself?

Methods

This paper stems from ongoing PhD research and has used primary, secondary and tertiary sources with which to generate a theoretical approach in relation to the role and function of VSCs within particular political and policy contexts. In this respect the use of specific policy documents is crucial as they are likely to reflect the received approach to

specific discourses and as such may reproduce and reinforce existing power relationships between different agencies, organisations and individuals, resembling what Parsons refers to as 'deep theories' or 'approaches' (Parsons, 1995).

Results and Discussion

The importance attached to the utilisation of the POS is as an explanatory concept and subsequently it is important to recognise that whilst it doesn't determine the activity of VSCs it may well be a substantial influence. The tripartite analytical tool, when applied to the VSC, highlights the extent to which these factors can influence and provide incentives in relation to peoples' expectations of success or failure in terms of their willingness to undertake particular collective action (Tarrow, 1998).

The VSC is consequently at its most distinct when viewed in institutional and subcultural terms generating an institutional capital that sponsors forms of collective action that are quite distinct from the majority of generic voluntary associations. Whilst this institutional capital is crucial in facilitating particular aspects of formal access to the institutions of the state or political decision-making processes, it is also important in terms of how 'upper tier' authorities operate to informally apply the formal institutional structure (Kriesi, 1995). Thus, the POS may be said to impart structural constraints that cause VSCs to respond both cognitively and practically to such conditions.

Thus issues surrounding the nature of particular sports and the specific sub-culture of specific clubs: such as the socio-cultural make-up of a VSC; its geographical location; as well as a concern with its provenance, may all impact on the strategic approaches taken towards different VSCs by different authorities. The configuration of power in shaping both formal and informal dimensions of the POS for VSCs raises two particular issues. First, the extent to which the political environment in Britain has been made more appealing and more supportive to volunteerism in general. Second, voluntary associations have signalled a willingness to be supported, included and to operate proactively within a government sponsored policy agenda.

This paper seeks to offer a contextual approach to the interpretation of policy and the political process involved in establishing collective action amongst VSCs in England. VSCs do not operate in a vacuum and are increasingly attuned to a wide variety of constituencies, and a broad understanding of the POS within which voluntary sports clubs operate may lessen their susceptibility to what Horch has described as 'self-destroying processes' and reaffirm the value of the VSC for and of itself.

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