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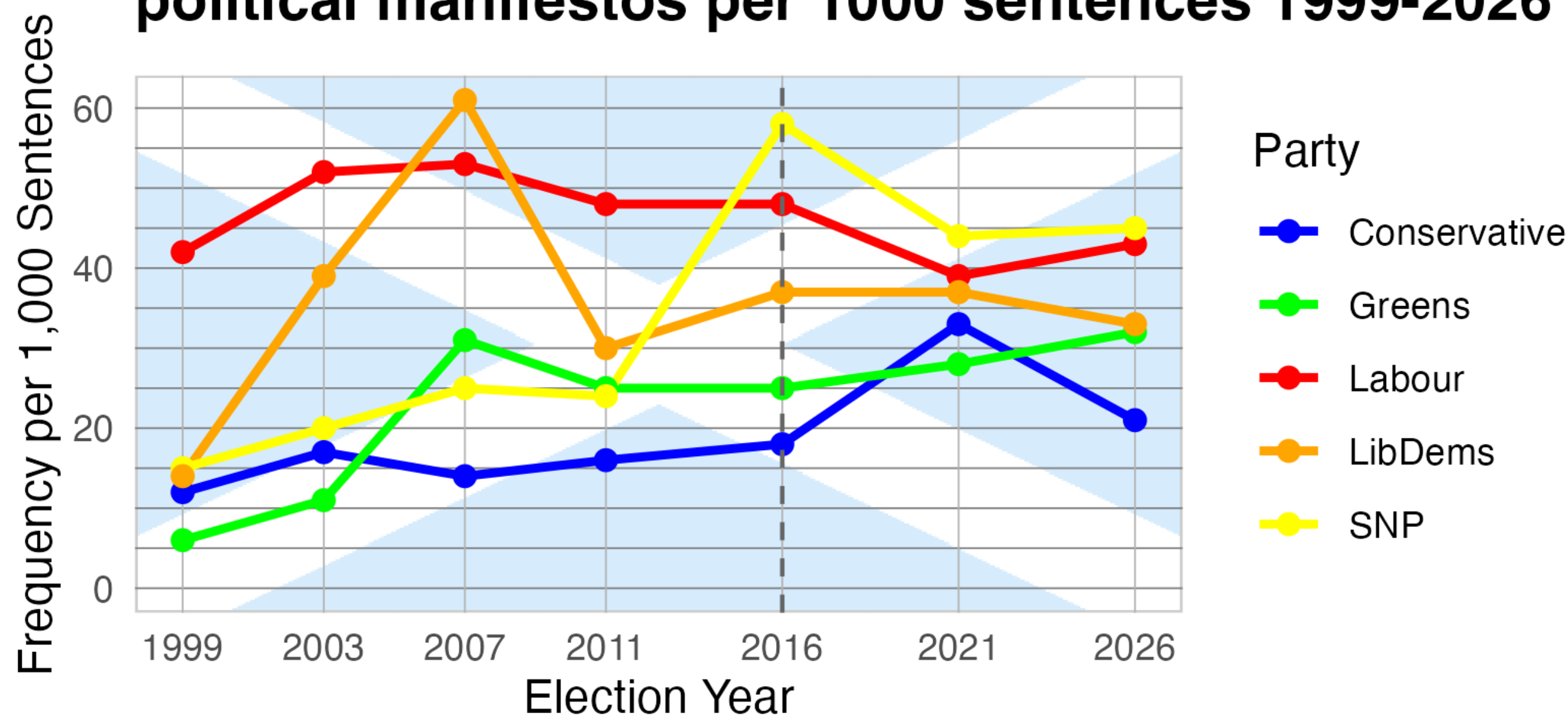
A Hollow Franchise or Substantive Enfranchisement? A comparative mixed method study of the effectiveness of votes at 16 in Scottish and Welsh devolution.

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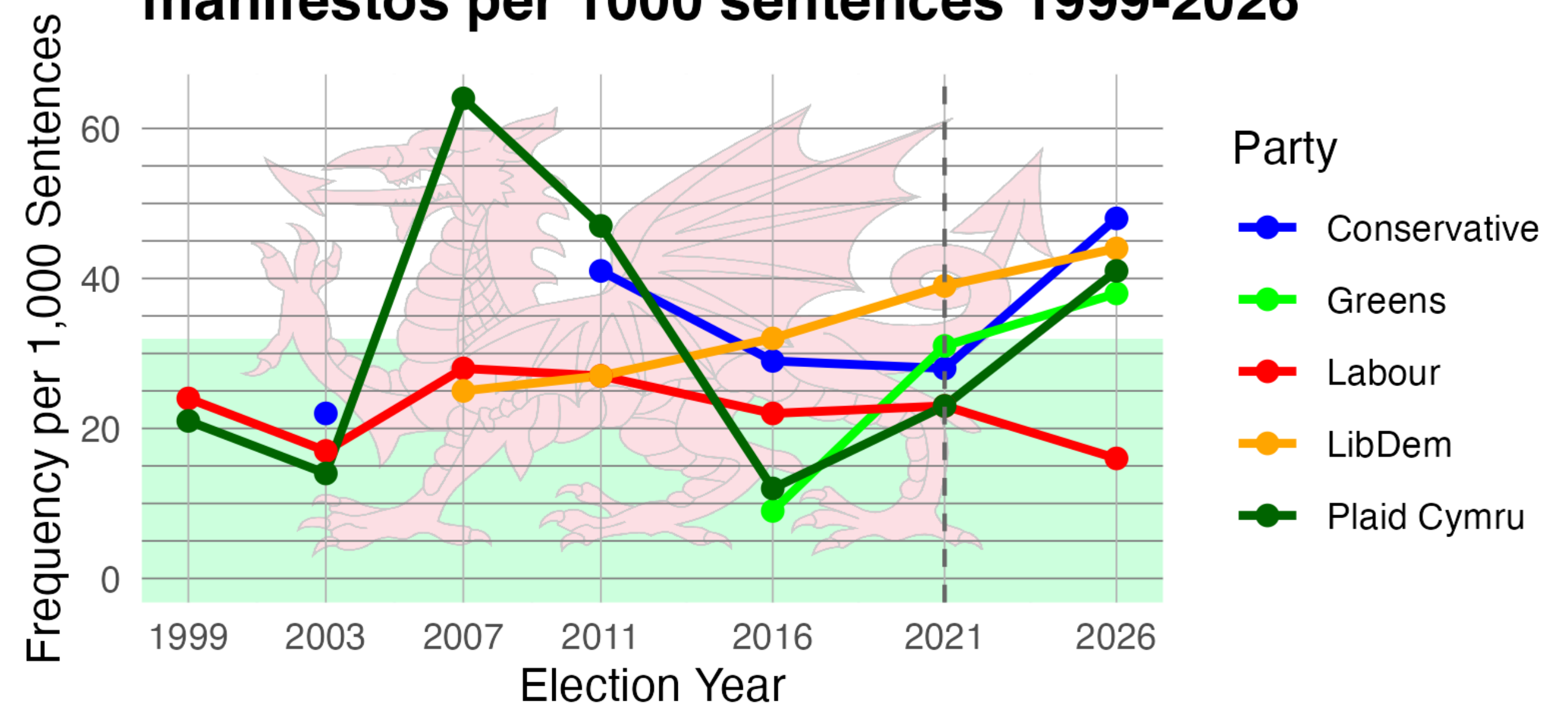


Overview

Scotland: Frequency of youth mentions in party political manifestos per 1000 sentences 1999-2026



Wales: Frequency of youth mentions in party political manifestos per 1000 sentences 1999-2026



This study suggests that policy outcomes of votes at 16 are mixed; whilst youth mentions have increased cross-nationally and across a few parties, this is unsystematic. Further framing of youth is misaligned with that of a newly enfranchised electorate.

Introduction

The UK government plans to introduce Votes at 16 nationally by 2029, this has reignited the debate over youth enfranchisement. Yet since introduction at a devolved level in Scotland (2016) and Wales (2021), research has been limited to electoral turnout and voting habits (Huebner, 2021). This study asks whether the implementation of Votes at 16 in Scotland and Wales has produced a substantive or a symbolic right to vote?

Methods

Quantitative: manifesto content analysis was used to count the frequency of explicit youth mentions, via a pre-defined dictionary using Nvivo 15. This was run across 5 parties and 7 elections (1999-2026) in Wales and Scotland. This was measured on a sentence level and then converted to youth mentions per 1000 sentences, to mitigate nonuniformity in manifesto length.

Qualitative: discourse framing analysis was conducted across the largest pro and anti votes at 16 parties and the election prior and post introduction of votes at 16, in Scotland & Wales. Quasi-sentences were used to ensure inclusion of contextual information. The coding framework is based on Lister (2007) becoming/belonging framework, adapted to examine belonging in that are young people viewed as a legitimate electorate?

Results / Findings

National level - (Wilcoxin rank test - one tailed)

Individually Scotland (2.77% -> 3.61%) and Wales (2.77% -> 3.61%) showed positive trends with 80% of parties having increased youth mentions, though individually underpowered (N=5). However when both nations were pooled together (N=10) - statistically significant increase (p=0.03223).

Party Level - % of manifesto content (Youth)

Country	Party	Pre (%)	Post (%)	Change (% pts)
Scotland	Con.	1.49	2.42	+0.93
Scotland	Greens	1.79	2.83	+1.04
Scotland	Labour	4.85	4.31	-0.54
Scotland	LibDems.	3.60	3.54	-0.06
Scotland	SNP	2.10	4.93	+2.10
Wales	Con.	3.10	3.79	+0.69
Wales	Greens	0.90	3.42	+2.52
Wales	Labour	4.28	3.81	-0.47
Wales	LibDems.	2.80	4.17	+1.37
Wales	Plaid Cymru	3.16	3.20	+0.04

The Qualitative coding showed in almost every case, Political parties framed young people as 'belonging' (political actors with agency) less after the introduction of votes at 16, instead using more 'becoming' (developmental/future) framing, the only exception to this was Labour (Wales). Further the neutral catagory (youth policy without framing) were predominant throughout.

"The role of social workers in protecting children is key." - SNP 2016 (becoming)

"Energise youth engagement in politics, funded by a cut in ministerial pay." - Welsh Conservative - 2016 (belonging)

Party	Nation	Belonging	Becoming	Belong.	Becom.
SNP 2011	Scotland	12	19	38.7%	61.3%
SNP 2016	Scotland	6	45	11.8%	88.2%
Conservative 2011	Scotland	1	5	16.7%	83.3%
Conservative 2016	Scotland	1	6	14.3%	85.7%
Labour 2016	Wales	1	3	25.0%	75.0%
Labour 2021	Wales	7	23	23.3%	76.7%
Conservative 2016	Wales	8	8	50.0%	50.0%
Conservative 2021	Wales	0	4	0%	100%

Conclusion

Ultimately this study suggests that the policy outcome of votes at 16 in Scotland and Wales is mixed, whilst there's some evidence that youth mentions have increased cross-nationally and across a few parties, this isun systematic. Coupled with qualitative discourse analysis than shows an initial homogeneous result that becoming framing of youth increased post votes at 16.

Key References

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