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Sport Policy and Electoral Decision-Making: Evidence from Self-Reported Voting Intentions in Portugal

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Abstract

Sport management has increasingly adopted a multidisciplinary approach to understanding sport and its effects on contemporary societies. Yet the relationship between sport policy and electoral decision-making remains comparatively underexplored, particularly when sport is considered as a public policy domain rather than through sporting success or specific sport-related ballot questions. This study explores the self-reported salience of sport policy in electoral decision-making among Portuguese voters and examines public perceptions of the relationship between sport, politics, and public responsibility for sport development. An exploratory, descriptive quantitative design was used, based on primary data collected through a multidimensional online questionnaire. Data were collected between November 2024 and January 2025, yielding 937 valid responses. The largest single share of respondents (46.4%) reported considering local sport development when voting in local elections, while 45.7% stated that, in a hypothetical situation of indecision, they would vote for the candidate or political party presenting the greatest number of measures for local sport; the corresponding figure for national elections was 40.9%. At the same time, 79.4% agreed that sport and physical activity should be a political priority, whereas 44.3% perceived differences in public investment in sport across political parties and 44.0% did not perceive sport as sufficiently recognised by political elites. The findings suggest that sport policy has a notable degree of self-reported electoral salience in this sample, particularly in local contexts, while also revealing substantial uncertainty about political recognition and party differentiation. While stated intentions cannot be equated with observed voting behaviour and the voluntary online sample does not support population-level representativeness, the study provides exploratory evidence that sport policy can constitute a relevant consideration in electoral decision-making, particularly in local electoral contexts.

Keywords: sport management; sport policy; sport governance; public policy; municipalities; public opinion; voting intentions; sport sociology

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1. Introduction

Research in the field of sport management has explored different areas over the last decade (López-Carril et al. 2019; Teixeira et al. 2022; Guidotti et al. 2023), contributing to multidisciplinary advances and innovation, as well as to problem-solving and a better understanding of sport-related phenomena (Hammerschmidt et al. 2024; Teixeira et al. 2024a). However, important questions remain to be explored in the relationship between sport, politics and society (Sesinando et al. 2022; Moradi et al. 2023; Meeuwsen and Kreft

2023), particularly regarding public opinion as an indicator of how political action in sport development is perceived and whether these perceptions may be relevant to political decision-making.

Existing research on electoral choice shows that voters rely on multiple considerations, including ideology, party identification, candidate characteristics, policy preferences, evaluations of government performance, and contextual factors (Lisi 2019; Jeroense and Spierings 2023). Sport has rarely been treated as a policy issue within this broader framework. Importantly, however, the literature is not entirely absent: research has examined the electoral consequences of sporting success, sport-related ballot questions, and the role of issue salience in local elections (Marien et al. 2015; Rapeli and Söderlund 2022; Reuse and Stiers 2026). The more specific gap addressed here concerns sport policy provision as a general electoral consideration: whether citizens report taking the public provision, development, and governance of sport into account when forming a voting intention.

The distinction from the adjacent sport-and-politics literature is important. Studies have examined whether sporting outcomes affect electoral evaluations, with evidence that is both suggestive and contested (Healy et al. 2010; Müller and Kneafsey 2023). Other research has examined revealed voting on sport-related ballot questions, including referenda on stadium subsidies, where proximity to facilities can be associated with voting preferences (Coates and Humphreys 2006). These approaches differ from the present study, which does not examine sporting results or a specific referendum; instead, it asks whether respondents report incorporating sport policy provision and public investment into electoral considerations. This narrower distinction defines the contribution without implying that the broader relationship between sport and voting has not previously been studied.

Extensive research shows that citizens vote for different reasons and based on multiple criteria (Cancela 2020; Harrison 2020; Lisi 2024), including considerations related to the performance of political actors, policy preferences, and the issues that voters regard as relevant to their lives.

Across societies, certain concerns are particularly important because they directly affect people's lives (Lönnqvist and Ilmarinen 2024; Grecu et al. 2025), such as the economy, health, employment, education and security (Alvarez-Galvez et al. 2013; Arzheimer et al. 2017; Lisi 2019). Research also points to the potential contribution of sport to several areas of public concern, raising questions about the extent to which this contribution is recognised in political and social priorities (Teixeira et al. 2023b; Moustakas and Robrade 2023; Bergsgard 2025).

At the European level, sport has increasingly been incorporated into policy agendas addressing wider social objectives, including social cohesion. However, critical analyses suggest that these policy frameworks may privilege individual-level interventions while paying insufficient attention to structural inequalities and barriers to social cohesion (Moustakas 2023).

Previous research on the main criteria associated with electoral decision-making suggests that these include sociodemographic and identity-related factors, ideology and personal values, party affiliation, candidate characteristics and positions regarding public policy (Lisi 2019; Jeroense and Spierings 2023), especially when it comes to national elections (Lisi 2019; Lundåsen and Erlingsson 2023).

These dimensions encompass several indicators regarded as particularly important in the decision-making process, such as social class, religion, education, gender and age, region of residence, and ethnic or racial identity (Arzheimer et al. 2017; Rose and van der Eijk 2022; Grauwe and Goubin 2026), as well as left–right positioning, views on the role of the state and the national economy, support for policy measures, and affinity with a particular political party, among others (Freire 2015; Weinschenk and Dawes 2017; Quinlan

and Okolikj 2020). Other relevant considerations include social welfare, security, and civil rights, as well as perceptions of the economic condition of citizens themselves and assessments made regarding the actions of sovereign and governmental bodies (De Vries et al. 2018; Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2019; Kalev et al. 2025).

However, while national issues affecting society as a whole may receive greater attention in national elections, these considerations may differ in local elections (Kim and Jung 2020; Gendzwill et al. 2022), with issues more closely related to citizens' everyday lives becoming more prominent (Vassallo 2022; Lysek 2025). Local government decisions may be particularly visible to residents because their consequences can be experienced in everyday life (Vassallo 2022; Chamusca 2025).

In this context, participation and voting decisions in local elections may be more responsive to perceptions of urban development (Borwein and Lucas 2023; Ochoa-Rico et al. 2024; Alvarado and Pettersen 2024), especially in relation to infrastructure provision and improvements, access and mobility, urban hygiene, living conditions, essential public services, public spaces and leisure areas, public school provision, primary health care and security, among others (Lee et al. 2022; Alexandropoulou et al. 2023). There may also be greater awareness of the political actions of local officials, as well as the level of local development and how municipal public resources are used (Garcia-Unanue et al. 2021; Romero-Subia et al. 2022).

The present study draws on three complementary ideas from electoral research. First, issue voting and political accountability suggest that voters may use policy positions and evaluations of public action as criteria when assessing candidates and parties. Second, the second-order election perspective highlights that the relative importance of local and everyday concerns can differ across electoral arenas (Reif and Schmitt 1980), while research on municipal elections shows that local policy concerns and knowledge of local candidates can contribute to vote choice and deviations from national party preferences (Marien et al. 2015). This suggests a relevant expectation for the present study, as sport provision is largely delivered through local facilities, programmes, spaces, and services, and its perceived relevance may be more salient in local than in national electoral contexts.

Third, the distinction between valence and issue ownership is useful for interpreting a possible combination of high general support for sport and weak perceived differentiation between parties. Citizens may broadly value sport as a desirable public good without identifying a particular party as uniquely competent or committed to it (Stokes 1963; Petrocik 1996). The theoretical mechanism explored here is therefore not a causal claim that sport changes votes, but a more cautious proposition: proximity to sport policy and perceptions of political provision may contribute to the salience of sport as one of several considerations that respondents report using when expressing a voting intention.

Individual-level issue salience offers a further explanation for why sport policy may matter to some respondents more than to others. Research on issue publics suggests that citizens differ in the personal importance they attach to specific policy domains, while studies of issue ownership indicate that issue salience can condition the relationship between perceived party competence and electoral choice (Krosnick 1990; Bélanger and Meguid 2008). From this perspective, sport participation may be associated with greater attention to sport policy, without necessarily implying a corresponding change in actual voting behaviour.

Considering the range of criteria identified in previous research, and the growing importance of sport as a unifying and multidisciplinary social phenomenon over the last decade (Sesinando et al. 2023), sport may merit greater attention when studying the factors associated with electoral participation, especially in local elections. Beyond public sport provision, major sporting events also create opportunities for civic participation through volunteering. Research on Olympic volunteers highlights the motivations and expectations

associated with participation in these events, illustrating another dimension of citizens' engagement with sport (Teixeira et al. 2024b). Regular physical activity and sport have long been regarded as important components of contemporary public health and social policy because of their potential benefits for citizens' lives (Biernat et al. 2020; Hafner et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2021), while the European Model of Sport emphasises that it is the responsibility of the respective Member States to pursue and implement public policies that promote increased regular participation in sport and the adoption of healthier habits by citizens (Christiansen et al. 2014; Moustakas 2022).

As proposed in the European Model of Sport, and benefiting from their proximity to citizens, municipalities are expected to respond within their legal powers and responsibilities through the decentralisation process (Sesinando et al. 2022; Chamusca 2025; Marcen et al. 2025), thereby supporting public investment and the design, implementation and evaluation of public development policies that improve daily life in cities (Hermelin and Trygg 2021; Manes-Rossi et al. 2023), especially with regard to sport (Sesinando et al. 2023; Teixeira et al. 2024a).

Although central governments act primarily as legislators, providing a legal framework and guidelines for the organisation and governance of sport, while also establishing the principles and guidance for implementing public sport policies (Christiansen et al. 2014; Carvalho et al. 2022; Teixeira et al. 2024a), local authorities, in turn, play a central role in the development of local and regional sport at different levels. Among all the stakeholders involved in sport development, municipalities play an essential role in supporting and promoting sport participation at various levels, thereby forming an important part of the wider sport system (Sesinando et al. 2023; Teixeira et al. 2023a).

As a result, local authorities are effectively responsible for local policy measures aimed at developing and improving conditions that encourage participation in sport (Teixeira and Ribeiro 2016; Carvalho et al. 2022). This involves not only urban development and improvement through the creation and modernisation of public spaces for the safe practice of physical activity and sport, but also the provision of an adequate number of public sport facilities in accordance with the resident population (Guerreiro et al. 2024; Teixeira et al. 2024a), as well as public sport services at affordable costs for all citizens (Guerreiro et al. 2024), including regular or occasional sport programmes, activities and events that are open to the public and tend to be free of charge (Lera-López et al. 2022; Teixeira et al. 2023a).

Therefore, this multidisciplinary and multilevel intervention in cities can affect people's daily lives, while the proximity of local policy may increase citizens' awareness of what is and is not being done (Romero-Subia et al. 2022), alongside potential benefits for living conditions, health, and well-being (Baxter et al. 2023; Messing et al. 2025). Citizens may consequently be more attentive to decisions affecting their country and city because such decisions can be reflected in everyday life (Romero-Subia et al. 2022; Säfvenbom et al. 2023). In turn, research suggests that politicians may respond to public opinion and to issues perceived as salient among voters (Walgrave and Soontjens 2023; Ahrens 2024; Butler et al. 2024).

In terms of sport, there appears to be growing engagement and widespread support among political leaders and parties for promoting sport as a contributor to social progress and improved living conditions (Räikkönen and Hedman 2025), including in Portugal (Teixeira et al. 2024a). Until recently, this engagement has been visible mainly in cases of national and/or international sporting success as a means of gaining electoral advantage and positive public visibility through association with sporting achievements (Dichter 2021).

This policy response to public needs in sport development is increasingly visible in contemporary cities (Säfvenbom et al. 2023), especially in large urban centres, with municipalities playing a leading role in promoting, modernising and improving conditions

for and access to sport (Tang and Figliola 2025), alongside growth in participation in non-federated and non-competitive sport across different age groups and socio-economic contexts (Louro et al. 2021; Anagnostopoulos 2023).

From this perspective, the increased visibility of local and national action in sport policy, combined with the growing demand for public spaces and facilities in cities, provides a relevant context for examining whether sport policy is perceived as part of electoral decision-making. These developments, together with gaps in the sport management literature, raise questions about the possible relationship between proximity to sport in cities and how people see sport development (Sesinando et al. 2026). At the same time, it encourages a political debate about whether sport should be valued more or less by municipalities according to the level of citizens' participation in sport, which could influence how people perceive and evaluate local political decisions and policy-making regarding local sport development.

Against this background, the study adopts an exploratory approach to examine sport policy as a possible component of electoral decision-making, while distinguishing between respondents' perceptions, stated voting intentions, and actual electoral behaviour. More specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) To what extent do respondents report considering sport policy and local sport development when making electoral decisions, and does this reported salience differ between local and national elections? (RQ2) How do respondents perceive the political recognition of sport, differences in public investment, and the responsibilities of different levels of government for sport policy? (RQ3) Do reported sport-related electoral considerations vary according to gender, region of residence, and sport participation? These questions are intended to structure the empirical analysis without implying causal effects on actual voting behaviour.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs an exploratory quantitative design, integrating descriptive and inferential statistical analyses to investigate the relationship between sport policy, public perceptions, and self-reported electoral considerations in Portugal. Based on 937 validated responses collected through a specifically designed multidimensional questionnaire, the methodological framework enables a systematic examination of sport-related political attitudes, policy priorities, and stated voting intentions, alongside comparisons across electoral contexts and selected sociodemographic groups. This approach provides an empirical foundation for understanding the perceived relevance of sport policy in electoral decision-making, while maintaining the non-causal and exploratory scope of the investigation.

2.1. Participants

The sample (Table 1) consisted of 486 male respondents (51.9%) and 451 female respondents (48.1%). The largest regional group was the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (n = 425, 45.4%), followed by the Centre (n = 218, 23.3%) and the North (n = 166, 17.7%). The regional distribution differs from that of the resident population in Portugal (34.6% in the North, 28.0% in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (AML), and 21.7% in the Centre). In particular, the Lisbon Metropolitan Area is overrepresented, while the North is considerably underrepresented. No post-stratification or population weighting was applied, given the non-probability recruitment design and the exploratory purpose of the study.

The target population comprised citizens residing in Portuguese territory, aged 18 or over, and legally eligible to vote under Portuguese law. The electoral register in December 2023 included 9,293,037 citizens meeting these criteria. A total of 971 responses were received, of which 937 were retained after screening for inconsistencies and constituted the analytical sample. Because recruitment relied on voluntary participation through online

dissemination, the resulting sample should be understood as a non-probability convenience sample rather than a statistically representative sample of Portuguese voters.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of respondents.

	Male		Female	
	f	%	*f*	%
Gender	**486**	**(51.9%)**	**451**	**(48.1%)**
Region of residence:				
Mainland Portugal				
North	100	(20.6%)	66	(14.6%)
Centre	122	(25.1%)	96	(21.3%)
Lisbon Metropolitan Area	199	(41.0%)	226	(50.1%)
Alentejo	28	(5.8%)	24	(5.3%)
Algarve	13	(2.7%)	22	(4.9%)
Autonomous Region of the Azores	12	(2.5%)	14	(3.1%)
Autonomous Region of Madeira	12	(2.5%)	3	(0.7%)
Total	**486**	**(100.0%)**	**451**	**(100.0%)**

2.2. Procedure and Data Collection

Although validated instruments are available in the political science and sociology literature, these were not considered sufficiently aligned with the specific objectives of the present study. Given the absence of an existing instrument sufficiently suited to examining sport policy provision as a specific electoral consideration, as well as the exploratory nature and stated objectives of the research, primary data were collected using a multidimensional questionnaire specifically designed to address the objectives of the broader study. To facilitate participation by eligible voters residing across Portugal, an online questionnaire was made available to individuals from different backgrounds and social contexts.

Data were collected through a multidimensional questionnaire developed to examine different aspects of the relationship between sport, society, and public policy: (i) Sport Development; (ii) Sport, Politics and Society; and (iii) Sport Participation Habits. Following the first publication focusing on sport development (Sesinando et al. 2026), the present study explores a second dimension of the same multidimensional questionnaire, namely Sport, Politics and Society, with particular emphasis on the role of sport policy in self-reported electoral decision-making. To capture a broad range of perspectives, the recruitment strategy sought participation from individuals both within and outside sporting contexts. Although both publications draw on the same respondent sample, they primarily examine different questionnaire items, with limited overlap.

After the questionnaire had been finalised, the survey link was disseminated through the authors' social media platforms and through multiple public and private organisations across different areas of activity. Organisations connected to sport were included, but dissemination also targeted a larger number of organisations with no direct connection to sport, in an attempt to reduce the risk that recruitment would disproportionately reach people already interested in sport. Nevertheless, because participation was voluntary and the study was explicitly concerned with sport, self-selection and topic-related participation bias cannot be ruled out.

In addition to dissemination through Facebook and LinkedIn, a database of institutional contacts was created using publicly available organisational email addresses. A total of 1654 invitations were sent; 31% were unsuccessful because the relevant account was blocked or the address could not be found. The initial target of at least 385 valid responses was used as a practical minimum for the planned descriptive and inferential analyses. Given the

non-probability recruitment strategy, this number should not be interpreted as guaranteeing population representativeness or a conventional margin of sampling error.

This research was conducted as a supplementary doctoral study approved by the University of Évora (Portugal), under project reference GD/53048/2022/P1. Data collection followed the principles of good scientific conduct established by the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and the applicable research integrity guidelines of the University of Évora.

The invitation to participate included an introductory statement describing the study, which indicated that participation was voluntary and confidential, as well as the target population. To ensure the reliability of responses and avoid duplication, the option restricting submissions to one response per Google account was enabled. In total, 971 responses were obtained, of which 937 were validated after screening. A conventional response rate cannot be calculated because the survey link could be forwarded by recipients and the number of people who ultimately received the link is unknown. The raw recruitment figures are therefore reported for transparency (1141 successfully delivered emails; 971 responses), without presenting them as a response rate.

Instrument

To collect primary data on dimensions not adequately captured by existing instruments, the questionnaire was administered through Google Forms. This approach was selected to facilitate data collection within the available timeframe. The online format was also intended to facilitate dissemination and participation while accommodating the dimensions and indicators examined.

Following standard procedures for questionnaire pre-testing, the instrument was initially assessed for design, comprehension, and response time by 15 individuals, including three academic experts. Feedback from this stage was used to refine the final questionnaire, and internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients ranging from $\alpha = 0.708$ to $\alpha = 0.722$ for the relevant scales.

The introductory part of the questionnaire included information about the study's objectives, instructions for completing it, and details of the authors and their institutional affiliations. This was followed by information about the population under study, as well as a statement confirming that no personal data would be collected and that responses would remain confidential and results would be used solely for research reporting. It was also emphasised that participation would be voluntary but restricted to citizens who met the mandatory requirements, and that responses from ineligible individuals would be excluded. Confirmation of voluntary participation was requested at the end of the questionnaire in order to validate the responses. For the purposes of the present study, 25 questionnaire items were selected, comprising eight sociodemographic questions and two groups of items related to the Sport, Politics and Society dimension: "Electoral behaviour of participating voters" and "Society, Political Priorities and Sport Policy and Development".

The sociodemographic dimension comprised eight closed questions designed to characterise respondents according to the selected sociodemographic variables. The "Electoral behaviour of participating voters" group consisted of five multiple-choice questions, with the aim of identifying and characterising citizens' electoral behaviour, as well as their overall perception of the political party's proximity to sport. Finally, the group "Society, Political Priorities and Sport Policy and Development" comprised 12 statements assessing respondents' agreement with items addressing different dimensions of the relationship between sport and politics, using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponded to "I completely disagree" and 5 corresponded to "I completely agree".

For the party-perception item, the response categories were defined according to the Portuguese municipal political context at the time of data collection, focusing on parties that had already exercised, or held, political power in municipalities. Chega had not yet exercised municipal political power at the time of the study, while the Bloco de Esquerda had done so only once; both were therefore included in the "Other political parties and/or movements" category. This categorisation was intended to reflect municipal political relevance at the time of data collection rather than to provide an exhaustive classification of all parties.

For transparency, RQ1 is addressed through the descriptive sport-and-voting items in Table 7 and the paired Wilcoxon comparison of the local (Q21) and national (Q28) voting-consideration items reported in the Results; RQ2 is addressed through the items on political recognition, investment, policy priorities, and governmental responsibility in Tables 6 and 7; and RQ3 is addressed through the gender and sport-participation comparisons in Tables 8 and 9, respectively, together with the regional comparisons reported in the Results. The analyses therefore move from overall response distributions to paired and group comparisons, without treating these relationships as causal effects.

2.3. Data Analysis

The sociodemographic variables included gender, age, nationality, marital status, academic qualifications, professional status, region of residence, and sport participation. Electoral variables included voting experience, voting regularity, voting decision, and perceptions of political intervention. The sport-policy dimension included perceived value of sport, investment, policy priorities, sport and voting intentions, and political responsibilities. Descriptive analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 30.0, while ordinal regression models and associated diagnostics were conducted in Python using the statsmodels package (version 0.14.6; Python 3.13.5), with the results presented in tables.

Associations between gender and selected categorical sociodemographic variables were examined using Pearson's chi-square tests, with Cramér's V used to assess effect size. Where expected cell frequencies were low, statistical significance was additionally assessed using Monte Carlo simulation with 100,000 replicates and fixed marginal totals.

As a complementary exploratory analysis, proportional-odds ordinal logistic regression models were fitted for Q21 (local elections) and Q28 (national elections), adjusting for sport participation, gender, age (per decade), tertiary education, and regular voting in national elections. The primary models included all 937 respondents; N/A responses for national voting regularity ($n = 72$) were coded as not reporting regular voting, without assuming that these respondents voted irregularly. Because this category combines distinct or unreported voting experiences, sensitivity analyses were conducted excluding these respondents ($n = 865$). Model convergence, multicollinearity, and the proportional-odds assumption were assessed, with the latter evaluated using likelihood-ratio comparisons with multinomial models and Brant-type Wald tests across cumulative logits. Results were interpreted as exploratory adjusted associations rather than causal effects.

Results are reported using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. For inferential comparisons, the Mann–Whitney U test was used for two independent groups and the Kruskal–Wallis H test for three or more independent groups. Significant Kruskal–Wallis results were followed by Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons. A within-respondent comparison of Q21 (consideration of local sport development when voting in local elections) and Q28 (consideration of national sport development when voting in national elections) was conducted using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test; its result is reported with the W statistic and matched rank-biserial effect size. Given the large sample size, statistical significance is interpreted cautiously and is not taken by itself as evidence of substantive importance.

3. Results

The results first describe respondents' sociodemographic characteristics and then address the dimension "Sport, Politics and Elections", which encompasses respondents' electoral behaviour and their opinions on the relationship between society, political priorities, and sport policy and development.

3.1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Participating Voters

As shown in Table 1, the sample consisted of 51.9% male and 48.1% female respondents. The Lisbon Metropolitan Area accounted for 45.4% of the sample ($n = 425$), followed by the Centre (23.3%, $n = 218$) and the North (17.7%, $n = 166$). The regional distribution differs from that of the Portuguese population, and the observed imbalances are explicitly considered when interpreting regional comparisons.

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, regarding age, the largest age group was 46–55 years ($n = 312$, 33.3%), followed by 36–45 years ($n = 240$, 25.6%). Younger respondents aged 18–25 (7.0%) and 26–35 (14.1%), as well as respondents aged over 65 (2.8%), were less represented in the sample.

Table 2. Socio-demographic profile of respondents (cont.).

	Male		Female	
	f	%	*f*	%
Gender	**486**	**(51.9%)**	**451**	**(48.1%)**
Age range (by gender):				
18–25	28	(5.8%)	37	(8.2%)
26–35	57	(11.7%)	76	(16.8%)
36–45	135	(27.8%)	105	(23.3%)
46–55	152	(31.3%)	160	(35.5%)
56–65	93	(19.1%)	68	(15.1%)
>65	21	(4.3%)	5	(1.1%)
Total	**486**	**(100.0%)**	**451**	**(100.0%)**
Nationality:				
National Citizen (Portuguese)	481	(99.0%)	448	(99.3%)
European Citizen	3	(0.6%)	3	(0.7%)
Other foreign nationals	2	(0.4%)	-	-
Total	**486**	**(100.0%)**	**451**	**(100.0%)**
Marital status:				
Single	104	(21.4%)	151	(33.5%)
Common-law marriage	94	(19.3%)	54	(12.0%)
Married	249	(51.2%)	192	(42.6%)
Divorced	37	(7.6%)	49	(10.9%)
Widow/er	2	(0.4%)	5	(1.1%)
Total	**486**	**(100.0%)**	**451**	**(100.0%)**

Regarding nationality, the vast majority of respondents were Portuguese citizens ($n = 929$, 99.1%), as expected given the eligibility criteria. Regarding marital status, married respondents constituted the largest group ($n = 441$, 47.0%), followed by single respondents ($n = 255$, 27.2%) and those in a civil partnership ($n = 148$, 15.8%). A statistically significant association was observed between gender and marital status ($\chi^2(4) = 28.53$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.175), although the effect size was small.

Regarding academic qualifications, there was a high proportion of respondents with higher education qualifications, with the majority of participants holding bachelor's degrees ($n = 378$, 40.3%) and master's degrees ($n = 214$, 22.9%). Nevertheless, 22.4% ($n = 210$) of

citizens had secondary education qualifications, indicating some variation in participants' educational backgrounds. Regarding employment status, the majority of respondents were employed ($n = 855$, 91.2%), mainly as employees ($n = 786$, 83.9%). A statistically significant association was also observed between gender and professional status ($\chi^2(5) = 22.29$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.154), with a small effect size. Finally, 66.5% of respondents reported participating in sport ($n = 623$), while 33.5% reported no participation ($n = 314$).

Table 3. Socio-demographic profile of respondents (cont.).

Academic qualifications:				
Basic Education	12	(2.5%)	6	(1.3%)
Secondary Education	115	(23.7%)	95	(21.1%)
Bachelor's Degree	192	(39.5%)	186	(41.2%)
Master's Degree	123	(25.3%)	91	(20.2%)
Ph.D. Degree	44	(9.0%)	73	(16.2%)
Total	**486**	**(100.0%)**	**451**	**(100.0%)**
Professional Status:				
Student	16	(3.3%)	21	(4.7%)
Employee worker	397	(81.7%)	389	(86.3%)
Self-employed worker	44	(9.1%)	25	(5.5%)
Unemployed	6	(1.2%)	9	(2.0%)
Retired	21	(4.3%)	2	(0.4%)
None of the above	2	(0.4%)	5	(1.1%)
Total	**486**	**(100.0%)**	**451**	**(100.0%)**
Sports Practice Habits:				
Practice	339	(69.7%)	284	(63.0%)
Non-practice	147	(30.3%)	167	(37.0%)
Total	**486**	**(100.0%)**	**451**	**(100.0%)**

3.2. Sport, Politics and Elections

The following section presents the results in two dimensions, since the aim was to describe respondents' electoral behaviour and to examine the reported salience of sport policy in voting intentions according to different indicators, as well as public opinion regarding the recognition and socio-political positioning of sport, and the intervention of various levels of public governance in local, regional and national sport development.

3.2.1. Electoral Behaviour of Participating Voters

This dimension examined the electoral behaviour of respondents, as well as their reported considerations when choosing local and national representatives (Tables 4 and 5). The results show that the vast majority of respondents have already participated in electoral processes at least once ($n = 871$, 93.0%), with a similar distribution between male ($n = 454$, 52.1%) and female respondents ($n = 417$, 47.9%), while only 7.0% had never voted.

Regarding regular electoral participation, most respondents described themselves as regular voters, since more than 80.0% indicated that they vote regularly in presidential elections, national elections and local elections, with only a very small number not doing so regularly (between 6.7% and 6.8%). As for European elections, regular voting was also reported (77.1%), although the number of irregular voters is higher (15.4%) when compared to previous elections. The results for the Autonomous Regions of the Azores and Madeira do not support reliable interpretation due to the small number of responses obtained from these regions.

Table 4. Electoral behaviour of participating voters.

	f	%
Have you ever voted?		
Yes	871	(93.0%)
No	66	(7.0%)
Total	**937**	**(100.0%)**
How often do you vote in the following elections?		
Presidential Elections		
I always vote (regular voter)	801	(85.5%)
I don't always vote (irregular voter)	64	(6.8%)
N/A (not applicable or no voting experience reported)	72	(7.7%)
National Elections		
I always vote (regular voter)	801	(85.5%)
I don't always vote (irregular voter)	64	(6.8%)
N/A (not applicable or no voting experience reported)	72	(7.7%)
Legislative Assemblies of the Autonomous Regions of Madeira and/or Azores		
I always vote (regular voter)	33	(3.5%)
I don't always vote (irregular voter)	4	(0.4%)
N/A (not applicable or no voting experience reported)	900	(96.1%)
Local Elections		
I always vote (regular voter)	808	(86.2%)
I don't always vote (irregular voter)	63	(6.7%)
N/A (not applicable or no voting experience reported)	66	(7.0%)
European elections		
I always vote (regular voter)	722	(77.1%)
I don't always vote (irregular voter)	144	(15.4%)
N/A (not applicable or no voting experience reported)	71	(7.6%)
Total	**937**	(100.0%)

In comparisons by gender and age, male respondents accounted for a slightly higher share of regular voters (53.0%) and female respondents for 47.0% in local elections, a pattern also observed in national elections with 52.2% and 47.7%, respectively. As for the predominant age group among irregular voters, the distributions were similar across both elections, with the majority aged between 36–45 (27.0–28.1%) and 46–55 (31.3–31.7%).

The largest single share of respondents (46.0%, $n = 431$) considered all elections important. When responses were examined by election type, some participants selected a single election type, with national elections receiving the greatest emphasis with 20.6% ($n = 193$), followed by local elections with 10.2% ($n = 95$) and a combination of national and local elections with 7.6% ($n = 71$) of responses. The distribution of responses did not allow for conclusive results, but there is a tendency to attribute greater importance to national elections and local elections.

Regarding the main considerations informing voting decisions, although 33.8% ($n = 317$) considered the three response options to be important, 30.8% ($n = 289$) indicated that they favour concrete political proposals/measures, regardless of the political party/movement, while 20.0% ($n = 187$) prioritised political party affinity. Decisions based solely on the leadership candidate were the least frequently selected option, with 11.0% of the total responses. In comparisons by gender, male respondents accounted for slightly higher proportions of those selecting concrete proposals/measures (54.0%), political party affinity (54.5%) and candidates for political leadership (53.4%). In terms of age and level

of academic qualifications, there were no significant differences, with response patterns being broadly similar.

Table 5. Electoral behaviour of participating voters (cont.).

	f	%
When voting, do you decide based on the candidate, affinity with party ideology, or specific political measures, regardless of the origin of the party/political movement?		
Affinity with party ideology	187	(20.0%)
Candidate for political leader	103	(11.0%)
Proposals/measures, regardless of political party/movement	289	(30.8%)
All of the above	317	(33.8%)
None of the above	41	(4.4%)
Total	**937**	**(100.0%)**
Which political party organisation, in your opinion, is most concerned with implementing public sports policies and public investment that promote the local development of sport in municipalities?		
CDS-Popular Party (CDS-PP)	8	(0.9%)
Unitary Democratic Coalition (PCP-PEV)	91	(9.7%)
Independent political movements	21	(2.2%)
Other Political Parties and/or Movements	48	(5.1%)
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	90	(9.6%)
Socialist Party (PS)	165	(17.6%)
No opinion	514	(54.9%)
Total	**937**	**(100.0%)**

Finally, when asked which political parties or movements they perceived as most committed to implementing sport policies and investing public resources in local sport, 54.9% of respondents reported having no opinion. Among those expressing a preference, the Socialist Party was selected by 17.6%, followed by the Unitary Democratic Coalition (PCP–PEV) at 9.7% and the Social Democratic Party at 9.6%. These figures should be interpreted descriptively rather than as a ranking of parties, particularly given the large proportion of respondents without an opinion and the small difference between some categories.

When comparing gender and age, male respondents accounted for a slightly higher proportion of those selecting certain political parties or movements, namely the Socialist Party (57.0%), the Social Democratic Party (63.6%) and other political parties/movements (62.5%). In terms of age group, respondents aged 46–55 were more likely to select the Socialist Party (30.9%) and other political parties/movements (27.1%), while the highest proportion selecting the Social Democratic Party was observed among respondents aged 36–45 (34.4%).

3.2.2. Society, Political Priorities and Sports Development

Following the analysis of reported voting behaviour, the study assessed the level of agreement among citizens regarding indicators associated with the political and social dimensions of sport, to examine their views on the role and actions of political authorities in local, regional, and national sport development (Tables 6 and 7).

The responses in Table 6 suggest that perceptions of whether Portuguese society values sport are mixed, since the largest single group of citizens (n = 344, 36.7%) selected the neutral response category. However, when comparing those who disagreed and those

who agreed, there was a somewhat larger share of respondents who disagreed with the statement ($n = 321$, 34.3%) than agreed ($n = 272$, 29.0%). Taken together, these responses indicate a divided distribution, with a relatively large neutral group and somewhat more disagreement than agreement.

Table 6. Level of agreement on intervention and political responsibility in sport.

	I Completely Disagree		I Disagree		I Neither Agree Nor Disagree		I Agree		I Completely Agree	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
Portuguese society values sport and regular physical activity.	71	(7.6%)	250	(26.7%)	344	(36.7%)	220	(23.5%)	52	(5.5%)
The promotion of physical activity and the development of sport should be a political priority based on the creation and adoption of public policy measures and instruments that benefit the population in its various age groups and contexts, as well as through public investment and support for various sports agents.	4	(0.4%)	19	(2.0%)	170	(18.1%)	349	(37.2%)	395	(42.2%)
There are differences in municipal public investment in sport depending on political party orientation.	41	(4.4%)	68	(7.3%)	413	(44.1%)	267	(28.5%)	148	(15.8%)
Overall, sport is respected and recognised by political elites as an important factor in the country's development.	122	(13.0%)	290	(30.9%)	314	(33.5%)	169	(18.0%)	42	(4.5%)
The foundation of a Ministry and/or Public Institute dedicated exclusively to Sport and its strategic multidisciplinary development, would reinforce and enhance the political importance of Sport as a fundamental pillar of a modern society.	32	(3.4%)	51	(5.4%)	204	(21.8%)	290	(30.9%)	360	(38.4%)

Regarding the role and public intervention in the promotion and development of sport, most respondents ($n = 744$, 79.4%) agreed that this is a political priority, which should be based on the adoption of political measures and instruments, as well as public investment, to promote sport participation and healthier habits that benefit people across the population, while also enabling the development of sport in cooperation with all sports stakeholders. Although 18.1% selected the neutral response category, only 2.4% ($n = 23$) disagreed. Regarding local public investment in sport, 44.3% ($n = 415$) agreed that investment differs according to political-party orientation, while 44.1% ($n = 413$) selected the neutral category. The near balance between these groups suggests substantial uncertainty about perceived party differences.

Regarding the recognition and appreciation of sport as an important factor in the country's development by political elites, 44.0% ($n = 412$) disagreed that sport is sufficiently recognised and respected by political representatives, whereas 22.5% ($n = 211$) agreed with the statement. The largest single response category was therefore disagreement, but the distribution also contained a substantial neutral group. From an institutional perspective, 69.4% ($n = 650$) agreed that creating a ministry and/or public institute dedicated exclusively to sport would strengthen its political recognition and strategic development. This result concerns respondents' stated preferences for institutional arrangements and does not establish that such an arrangement would produce the proposed effects.

Following on from this (Table 7), and regarding the reported salience of sport in voting intentions, the largest group of respondents ($n = 435$, 46.4%) agreed that they consider political action and local sport development when voting in local elections, although a considerable number remained neutral ($n = 289$, 30.8%). Taken together, the local-election items indicate that sport policy is salient for a substantial share of respondents, but they also show considerable neutrality.

Table 7. Level of agreement on intervention and political responsibility in sport (cont.).

	I Completely Disagree		I Disagree		I Neither Agree Nor Disagree		I Agree		I Completely Agree	
	f	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*	%
You consider the level of political action and local development of sport when you vote in local elections.	75	(8.0%)	138	(14.7%)	289	(30.8%)	266	(28.4%)	169	(18.0%)
In the event of indecision between candidates and/or political parties in Local Elections, you would vote for the candidate/political party that presented the most measures related to the local development of sport.	82	(8.8%)	116	(12.4%)	311	(33.2%)	244	(26.0%)	184	(19.6%)
You consider the level of political action and national development of sport when you vote in National Elections.	94	(10.0%)	174	(18.6%)	391	(41.7%)	200	(21.3%)	78	(8.3%)
In the event of indecision between candidates and/or political parties in the National Elections, you would vote for the candidate/political party that presented the most measures related to the national development of sport.	85	(9.1%)	138	(14.7%)	331	(35.3%)	245	(26.1%)	138	(14.7%)
The Government of the Portuguese Republic has the ultimate responsibility for defining and implementing public sports policies aimed at increasing and improving sports participation among the population.	4	(0.4%)	39	(4.2%)	202	(21.6%)	365	(39.0%)	327	(34.9%)
The governing bodies of the autonomous regions, in accordance with their own administrative autonomy, have the ultimate responsibility for defining and implementing public sports policies aimed at increasing and improving sports participation among the population.	5	(0.5%)	36	(3.8%)	268	(28.6%)	345	(36.8%)	283	(30.2%)
Local authorities, in accordance with their proximity, duties and legal powers, have the ultimate responsibility for defining and implementing public sports policies aimed at increasing and improving sports participation among the population.	4	(0.4%)	22	(2.3%)	144	(15.4%)	384	(41.0%)	383	(40.9%)

This pattern is consistent with a differentiated rather than uniform level of reported salience. Remaining in the field of sport's reported electoral salience, the national-level results show a close distribution between respondents who consider national sport development when voting (29.6%) and those who do not (28.6%), alongside a substantial neutral group (41.7%). This pattern suggests that sport is not uniformly salient at the national level and that a considerable share of respondents does not express a clear position.

To further examine differences in the reported electoral salience of sport policy between local and national elections, a paired comparison was conducted using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The analysis compared Q21 (consideration of local sport development when voting in local elections) with Q28 (consideration of national sport development when voting in national elections). Respondents reported significantly higher scores for the local item than for the corresponding national item (M = 3.34 vs. M = 2.99; W = 24,374; $p < 0.001$; matched rank-biserial r = 0.538).

In the event of citizens' indecision in voting for candidates and/or political parties in national elections, it was observed that 40.9% ($n = 383$) agreed to consider the proposals and measures presented for the national development of sport as a deciding factor in their voting intention, contrary to 23.8% ($n = 223$) who, even when undecided, did not consider this factor relevant to their final decision. Although a substantial share of respondents selected the neutral category (35.3%), the comparison shows lower reported salience for national than local sport-policy considerations. The national results therefore provide evidence of reported relevance, but not of a uniformly salient electoral issue.

As for the levels of intervention and political responsibility in defining public sport policies that increase and promote sports participation among the population, it was noted that most citizens agreed that this role should be exercised at different levels of government,

namely at the level of the government of the Portuguese Republic (n = 692, 73.9%) and the governments of the autonomous regions (n = 628, 67.0%), as well as at the local government level (n = 767, 81.9%), being the latter the most representative among citizens' agreement, which suggests that greater proximity to the population may increase awareness of the role of municipalities in defining public policies that best respond to the actual needs of each region.

Gender comparisons of sport-related voting considerations and policy priorities showed statistically significant differences (Table 8).

Table 8. Gender comparisons for sport-related electoral considerations and sport policy priority.

	Male			Female					
	N	**Mean**	**SD**	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**	***p***	**r**	**U**
Indecision between candidates and/or political parties in Local Elections and vote for the candidate/political party with most measures related to the local development of sport.	486	3.5	1.2	451	3.2	1.2	*<0.001*	0.146	125,609.5
Indecision between candidates and/or political parties in the National Elections and vote for the candidate/political party with most measures related to the national development of sport.	486	3.4	1.2	451	3.1	1.1	*<0.001*	0.130	123,843.5
The development of sport as a political priority based on public policy measures benefit the population, as well as through public investment.	486	4.3	0.8	451	4.1	0.8	*0.002*	0.109	121,536.0

Note: Mann–Whitney U test (two-sided, asymptotic significance); N = number of respondents; SD = standard deviation; U = Mann–Whitney test statistic; p = two-sided p-value; r = rank-biserial correlation effect size. Effect sizes are reported as absolute magnitudes; group means indicate the direction of differences.

For the local hypothetical voting-intention item, male respondents had a higher mean score than female respondents (M = 3.49 vs. M = 3.21; $p < 0.001$; rank-biserial r = 0.146). For the national item, the corresponding means were 3.35 and 3.10 ($p < 0.001$; r = 0.130). For the political-priority item, the means were 4.26 and 4.11 ($p = 0.002$; r = 0.109). Overall, we observed that male respondents reported higher mean scores for sport when undecided about who to vote for in local and national elections, as well as in terms of what they consider to be a priority in relation to promoting physical activity and the development of sport. These differences suggest that gender may be a relevant variable in understanding how voters interpret the role of sport in public policy and in their electoral choices.

Finally, statistically significant regional differences were observed for the two hypothetical voting-intention items. For the regional comparison of the local hypothetical voting-intention item, the Kruskal–Wallis test was significant (H = 16.78, $p = 0.010$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.012$). Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons identified a significant difference between the North and the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, with higher scores in the North (M = 3.67) than in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (M = 3.25). Other pairwise differences did not remain statistically significant after adjustment.

For the national hypothetical voting-intention item, the regional Kruskal–Wallis test was also significant (H = 22.53, $p < 0.001$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.018$). After Bonferroni adjustment, the significant pairwise difference was again between the North and the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, with higher scores in the North (M = 3.51) than in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area

(M = 3.10). The small epsilon-squared value indicates that region accounts for a limited proportion of variation.

Finally, Table 9 presents a comparative analysis of sport practitioners and non-practitioners across four indicators assessing the self-reported relevance of sport policy in electoral decision-making.

Table 9. Comparative analysis of sport practitioners and non-practitioners.

Rank-Biserial r	*p*	U	Non-Practitioners (n = 314) M (SD)	Practitioners (n = 623) M (SD)	Outcome
0.104	*0.007*	87,605.0	3.20 (1.16)	3.41 (1.17)	Local sport considered when voting (Q21)
0.157	*<0.001*	82,490.0	3.15 (1.14)	3.46 (1.19)	Local sport measures in hypothetical indecision (Q22)
0.139	*<0.001*	84,203.5	2.82 (1.02)	3.08 (1.08)	National sport considered when voting (Q28)
0.142	*<0.001*	83,955.0	3.04 (1.14)	3.32 (1.14)	National sport measures in hypothetical indecision (Q29)

These indicators examine whether respondents consider sport development when voting in local and national elections, as well as whether sport-related policy proposals could inform their stated voting intentions in hypothetical situations of indecision between candidates or political parties. Across all four indicators, sport practitioners reported consistently higher mean scores than non-practitioners, with statistically significant differences (all $p \leq 0.007$). The largest difference was observed in the consideration of local sport policy proposals under hypothetical electoral indecision (M = 3.46 vs. 3.15; r = 0.157). Nevertheless, the small rank-biserial effect sizes (r = 0.104–0.157) indicate that the magnitude of these differences remains limited.

As a complementary exploratory analysis (Table 10), ordinal logistic regression models were fitted for the local (Q21) and national (Q28) sport-policy voting-consideration items (n = 937). Sport participation was positively associated with higher response categories in both models (Q21: adjusted OR = 1.38, 95% CI 1.08–1.76; Q28: OR = 1.58, 95% CI 1.23–2.03). Female gender was associated with lower response categories in both contexts, while tertiary education showed a negative association in the national model. Age and self-reported regular voting showed no clear adjusted associations. Both models had limited explanatory power (McFadden pseudo-$R^2 \approx 0.015$).

Both models converged, with no evidence of substantial multicollinearity (maximum VIF = 1.18). Global Brant-type Wald tests did not identify statistically significant departures from proportional odds (Q21: $\chi^2(15) = 14.17$, $p = 0.513$; Q28: $\chi^2(15) = 13.54$, $p = 0.560$), and predictor-specific tests were also non-significant (all $p > 0.010$). Likelihood-ratio comparisons with multinomial logistic models yielded consistent results (Q21: $\chi^2(15) = 14.46$, $p = 0.491$; Q28: $\chi^2(15) = 13.76$, $p = 0.544$). Sensitivity analyses excluding respondents with N/A voting-regularity responses (n = 865) preserved the direction and statistical significance of the main associations with sport participation and gender.

Table 10. Exploratory adjusted ordinal logistic regression models for sport-policy considerations.

Predictor	Q21 Local: OR (95% CI); *p*	Q28 National: OR (95% CI); *p*
Sport practitioner	1.38 (1.08–1.76); *0.010*	1.58 (1.23–2.03); *<0.001*
Female	0.54 (0.43–0.68); *<0.001*	0.61 (0.48–0.78); *<0.001*
Age (per decade)	1.05 (0.95–1.17); *0.368*	1.05 (0.94–1.17); *0.391*
Tertiary education	0.76 (0.58–1.00); *0.050*	0.68 (0.52–0.90); *0.007*
Regular national voter	1.23 (0.86–1.77); *0.256*	1.02 (0.70–1.47); *0.929*

Note: OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. Both models included 937 respondents. N/A responses for national voting regularity ($n = 72$) were coded as not reporting regular voting; sensitivity analyses excluded these cases ($n = 865$).

These findings support the use of proportional-odds models for exploratory analysis, although non-significant diagnostic tests do not establish that the assumption holds exactly. Given the convenience sample and low pseudo-R^2 values, the adjusted associations should not be interpreted causally, generalised to the Portuguese electorate, or regarded as evidence of reliable individual-level prediction.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the self-reported salience of sport policy in electoral decision-making and respondents' perceptions of the relationship between sport, politics, and public responsibility for sport development. Its contribution should be understood within this specific scope. The findings do not demonstrate that sport policy determines electoral behaviour or changes election outcomes. Rather, they indicate that sport policy can enter the set of considerations that some respondents report using when evaluating electoral alternatives, thereby extending the discussion of sport, politics, and society within sport-management and sport-policy research (Sesinando et al. 2022; Moradi et al. 2023; Meeuwsen and Kreft 2023).

This distinction is particularly important given the characteristics of the achieved sample. The sample is regionally and demographically imbalanced, with the Lisbon Metropolitan Area overrepresented relative to the North and the other regions, a concentration of respondents aged 36–55 and with higher education, and a comparatively high proportion of sport practitioners. These characteristics limit population-level generalisation. The results should therefore be interpreted as patterns within the achieved sample rather than as estimates of the distribution of sport-related electoral attitudes among Portuguese voters as a whole.

The broader electoral profile of respondents provides useful context for interpreting the sport-policy items. Electoral choice was not described as a single-factor decision: 33.8% of respondents reported considering candidate, party ideology, and policy proposals collectively, while 30.8% selected concrete political proposals or measures, regardless of party affiliation, as their preferred basis for electoral choice. This pattern is consistent with a multidimensional understanding of electoral decision-making, in which voters may combine ideology, candidate evaluations, policy preferences, and other political considerations (Lisi 2019; Becker 2022; Jeroense and Spierings 2023). For the present study, the relevance of this finding lies not in demonstrating that sport policy changes vote choice, but in showing how a specific policy domain such as sport can plausibly enter a broader set of considerations used in political evaluation.

A central finding concerns the distinction between local and national electoral contexts. At the local level, 46.4% of respondents reported considering political action and local sport development when voting in local elections, while 45.7% stated that, in a hypothetical situation of indecision, they would favour the candidate or political party presenting more

measures related to local sport development. These figures indicate a substantial share of respondents reporting sport-policy salience, but they should be considered alongside the sizeable neutral responses, which show that sport is not uniformly relevant across the sample.

Reported salience was lower at the national level. Only 29.6% agreed that they consider national sport development when voting in national elections, compared with 28.6% who disagreed and 41.7% who selected the neutral response. In the hypothetical situation of electoral indecision, 40.9% reported that they would favour the candidate or party presenting more measures for national sport development. The national results therefore indicate relevance for a substantial subset of respondents, but not a uniformly salient national electoral issue.

The paired localnational comparison reinforces the interpretation that sport policy has greater self-reported electoral salience in local than in national elections. This finding is consistent with the expectation that sport policy may be more salient in electoral contexts where citizens experience public action and service provision more directly.

This interpretation is compatible with the second-order election perspective and with research showing that electoral considerations can differ across electoral levels and that local policy concerns, candidate characteristics, proximity, and issue salience can acquire particular relevance in municipal elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Marien et al. 2015; Cancela and Geys 2016; Reuse and Stiers 2026). It is also consistent with research emphasising the importance of citizens' proximity to local political action and perceptions of urban development and municipal services (Vassallo 2022; Borwein and Lucas 2023; Ochoa-Rico et al. 2024; Chamusca 2025).

Sport is particularly relevant to this distinction because a substantial part of its public provision is experienced through local facilities, programmes, public spaces, services, and municipal investment, with municipalities playing an important role in the implementation and development of sport policy (Sesinando et al. 2022; Teixeira et al. 2024a). The present findings therefore extend this literature by identifying sport policy as a possible local electoral consideration and provide a basis for further examining proximity as a mechanism linking municipal sport provision to political evaluation.

Respondents' perceptions of governmental responsibility reinforce the relevance of the local context. Although responsibility for sport policy was attributed across different levels of government, local authorities received the highest level of agreement (81.9%), compared with 73.9% for the Government of the Portuguese Republic and 67.0% for the governments of the autonomous regions. This pattern is consistent with the established role of municipalities in the provision and development of local sport policy (Louro et al. 2021; Teixeira et al. 2024a) and with research emphasising that local policy concerns can play a distinct role in municipal elections (Marien et al. 2015).

A second important finding concerns the distinction between the public-policy value attributed to sport and respondents' perceptions of party-political differentiation. A large majority (79.4%) agreed that the promotion of physical activity and sport development should constitute a political priority. At the same time, respondents expressed considerably greater uncertainty regarding political differentiation in this area. For example, 44.1% selected the neutral response when asked whether municipal investment in sport differs according to political-party orientation, while 54.9% reported no opinion when asked which political organisation was most concerned with local sport policy and investment.

This combination is theoretically relevant because it is compatible with a valence interpretation of sport policy. Citizens may broadly regard sport and physical activity as socially desirable public goods without associating them strongly with a particular party or perceiving clear differences in party competence or commitment (Stokes 1963;

Petrocik 1996). In this sense, sport may possess public-policy salience without functioning as a clearly established domain of party ownership. The findings thus identify a useful distinction between valuing sport as a policy objective and perceiving meaningful party competition over its provision, which future research can test against party programmes, policy commitments, and public investment.

Respondents' perceptions of political recognition are consistent with this distinction. A substantial proportion did not agree that sport is sufficiently recognised by political elites as an important component of national development, while 69.4% supported the proposition that a ministry and/or public institute dedicated specifically to sport could strengthen its strategic development and political importance. These responses indicate that many respondents distinguish between the value they attribute to sport as a policy domain and the level of institutional and political recognition they perceive it to receive. This distinction is relevant within the broader literature that treats sport policy as embedded in social, institutional, and political processes rather than solely as a matter of participation or organisational provision (Meeuwsen and Kreft 2023; Moradi et al. 2023).

The comparisons associated with sport participation provide further insight into variation in reported electoral salience. Sport practitioners reported higher scores than non-practitioners across all four sport-related electoral indicators, with consistently small rank-biserial effect sizes ($r = 0.104–0.157$). The direction of the association is compatible with the possibility that individuals who participate in sport have greater exposure to sport facilities, organisations, services, or policy interventions, particularly in contexts where municipalities play an important role in promoting access to sport and physical activity (Louro et al. 2021; Teixeira et al. 2024a).

These results identify a consistent, although modest, pattern that merits further examination in research on sport participation and political evaluation. The exploratory adjusted models further indicated that the positive association between sport participation and reported sport-policy electoral salience persisted after accounting for selected sociodemographic and electoral characteristics, although their explanatory power remained limited.

This pattern is consistent with the notion of issue publics, whereby certain policy domains may be particularly salient among individuals with stronger personal involvement in those domains (Krosnick 1990), although the present cross-sectional data cannot establish the mechanisms underlying this association.

Gender differences followed a similar pattern. Male respondents reported somewhat higher scores on the two hypothetical voting-intention items and on the sport-policy priority item, with small effect sizes ($r = 0.109–0.146$). The results therefore point to modest within-sample variation in the political relevance attributed to sport and provide a basis for examining whether similar patterns emerge in other samples and electoral contexts.

Regional differences were also statistically detectable but substantively limited. For both hypothetical voting-intention items, the clearest contrast occurred between respondents from the North and the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, with higher scores in the North. The corresponding effect sizes were small ($\varepsilon^2 = 0.012$ for the local item and $\varepsilon^2 = 0.018$ for the national item). Research on sport-related referenda has shown that geographical proximity can be associated with voting preferences (Coates and Humphreys 2006), while research on sporting outcomes has produced mixed evidence regarding electoral effects (Healy et al. 2010; Müller and Kneafsey 2023). More broadly, proximity and issue salience have also been identified as relevant to voting in local elections (Reuse and Stiers 2026). As the present study addresses sport policy provision rather than sporting success or a specific ballot measure, the regional pattern opens a distinct line of inquiry into how territorial context may shape the electoral salience of sport policy.

Taken together, these findings refine the role that sport policy may play within electoral decision-making. The evidence does not support treating sport as a dominant or uniformly decisive electoral issue. Instead, it suggests a more differentiated interpretation: (a) sport policy possesses measurable self-reported salience for part of the sample; (b) this salience is stronger in the local than in the national electoral context; (c) broad support for sport as a public-policy priority coexists with substantial uncertainty about party differentiation; and (d) differences associated with sport participation, gender, and region are present but generally modest. This interpretation is consistent with an electoral framework in which policy issues constitute only one component of a broader set of considerations shaping political evaluation (Lisi 2019; Becker 2022; Jeroense and Spierings 2023).

From a sport management perspective, this distinction is important. Contemporary research increasingly situates sport within broader social, institutional, governance, and political processes, highlighting the multidisciplinary character of sport policy and its relationship with society (Sesinando et al. 2022; Moradi et al. 2023; Meeuwsen and Kreft 2023; Teixeira et al. 2024a). The present study extends this perspective by treating sport policy as a potential component of political evaluation and public accountability rather than assuming that electoral relevance arises primarily through sporting success, major events, or specific referenda. In doing so, it broadens the scope of sport management research by showing that sport policy can also be examined as an issue of political salience, particularly in local electoral contexts.

5. Conclusions

This study examined whether sport policy forms part of respondents' stated electoral considerations and how its reported salience varies across electoral contexts and respondent characteristics. The findings provide exploratory evidence that sport policy can constitute one of several considerations in electoral decision-making, while offering no basis for concluding that sport determines actual vote choice or electoral outcomes.

The clearest finding concerns the distinction between local and national electoral contexts. Respondents reported greater salience of sport policy in local than in national electoral decision-making, and the within-respondent comparison confirmed a clear difference between the two levels. This pattern is consistent with the particular visibility and proximity of municipal sport provision and suggests that sport policy may become more politically salient when citizens encounter its facilities, programmes, services, and policy consequences within their local environment. The present design cannot establish that proximity causes this difference, but it identifies the local context as a particularly relevant setting for understanding the political salience of sport policy.

The findings also reveal an important distinction between the public value attributed to sport and its role in party-political differentiation. Sport and physical activity received broad support as a political priority, while respondents expressed substantially greater uncertainty regarding differences between political parties and the recognition afforded to sport by political elites. This pattern is compatible with the interpretation of sport as a broadly valued policy domain that does not necessarily function, in respondents' perceptions, as a clearly differentiated area of party ownership or electoral competition.

Reported sport-policy salience also varied according to sport participation, gender, and region, although these differences were generally modest. Sport practitioners consistently reported somewhat greater electoral salience than non-practitioners, while the gender and regional comparisons likewise revealed statistically detectable but small differences. These findings indicate heterogeneity within the sample but should not be interpreted as evidence of strong population-level divisions or causal relationships.

The principal contribution of this study is therefore not to demonstrate that sport influences election outcomes, but to identify sport policy as a potentially relevant and underexamined component of electoral evaluation. By distinguishing self-reported salience from observed voting behaviour, identifying a clear local–national difference, and showing that broad support for sport can coexist with weak perceived party differentiation, the study extends the intersection between sport management, public policy, and electoral research. In doing so, it provides a clearer basis for considering sport policy within future research on electoral decision-making without overstating what can be inferred from stated intentions. The adjusted models provide a limited robustness check of sample-level associations rather than a predictive account of electoral behaviour.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations define the scope within which the findings should be interpreted. First, the study adopted a cross-sectional exploratory design based on self-reported perceptions and voting intentions. The results therefore identify patterns of reported electoral salience rather than observed voting behaviour and should not be interpreted as evidence of causal effects on vote choice or electoral outcomes. In addition, the voluntary online recruitment strategy produced a non-probability sample with some demographic and regional imbalances, limiting statistical generalisation to the Portuguese electorate. The findings are consequently best understood as evidence of patterns within the achieved sample (Ajzen et al. 2004).

The high proportions of sport practitioners (66.5%), respondents with tertiary education (75.7%), and self-reported regular voters (85.5%) may reflect self-selection associated with greater interest in sport, political participation, or online research. These figures are not directly comparable with national indicators due to differences in sampling methods and measurements and should not be interpreted as population-level estimates. The adjusted ordinal regression models should likewise be interpreted as exploratory descriptions of conditional associations within this sample, not as population-level estimates or causal explanations. Their McFadden pseudo-R^2 values (approximately 0.015 in both models) indicate limited explanatory performance; statistically detectable associations therefore do not imply strong predictive utility or that the included covariates account for most variation in reported sport-policy salience. Adjustment for measured covariates cannot remedy the non-probability sampling design, unmeasured confounding, or possible selection bias.

Some characteristics of the questionnaire should also be considered when interpreting the magnitude of the reported salience of sport policy. The explicit focus on sport and the positive framing of some items may have influenced respondents' evaluations, while the study did not require respondents to assess sport in direct competition with other policy domains. Future studies could therefore examine the relative electoral salience of sport alongside areas such as health, education, housing, or the economy. Nevertheless, the present design provides an empirical basis for identifying whether sport policy enters respondents' electoral considerations and for comparing its reported salience across local and national electoral contexts.

Future research should test the robustness of these patterns across different samples, electoral cycles, and research designs. More broadly balanced or probability-based samples would strengthen population-level inference, while longitudinal research could examine the stability of sport-policy salience over time. Experimental approaches, including conjoint or vignette designs, could assess the relative weight assigned to sport when candidates or parties are evaluated across multiple policy dimensions. Combining public-opinion data with electoral manifestos, public expenditure, policy commitments, and implementation indicators would also allow future research to compare perceived political differentiation

with actual sport-policy provision. Such developments would build on the local–national distinction identified in this study and further clarify the role of sport policy within electoral evaluation.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participation was voluntary and confidential, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the conditions of participation before completing the questionnaire.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available. The relevant questionnaire dimensions, response scales, analytical procedures, and aggregated results are described in the article.

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