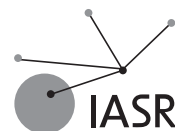




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Article

# Comparative Analysis of Sports Policies Under Different Political Systems: A Systematic Review and Thematic Synthesis

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## Abstract

This study presents a systematic review with structured thematic synthesis of global sports policies under diverse political systems, examining how governance models, funding frameworks, and policy implementation relate to elite performance, grassroots participation, and athlete support. Drawing on 34 peer-reviewed studies, the analysis reveals significant variations in political influence, ranging from centralized to decentralized governance, with corresponding differences in financing mechanisms such as state budgets, lottery revenues, and mixed public–private models. Findings indicate that higher and more strategically allocated funding, robust training facilities, and specialized coaching are consistently linked to improved international performance, while democratic systems generally promote more equitable development across elite and grassroots levels. However, persistent challenges—such as structural fragmentation, stakeholder conflicts, corruption, and resource constraints—limit policy effectiveness, particularly in developing contexts. Rather than treating regime type as a direct explanatory variable, the analysis traces how governance-capacity dimensions—state capacity, arm’s-length accountability, federation autonomy, policy coherence, and implementation capability—mediate the relationship between political systems and sport policy outcomes. Gender equity outcomes vary widely, with notable progress in some nations and stagnation in others, reflecting broader societal and cultural influences. The study concludes that coherent governance, stable financing, and inclusive athlete support are critical for sustainable sports development and offers comparative insights to inform evidence-based policymaking across political regimes.

## Keywords

Sport policies, Sport development, Sport governance, Area studies

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## Introduction

How sport expands, who is able to take part in it, and how competitive a nation becomes on the international stage are all shaped to a considerable degree by the policy choices governments make (Chen et al., 2021). The policies encompass resource allocation, the level of governmental intervention, and the methods of achieving elite performance and grass-roots participation (Adams, 2014). Effective policies can promote inclusivity and drive economic growth through job opportunities, tourism, and international prestige (Levermore, 2009). Effective policies also ensure the training and safety of the athlete, culminating in improved performance on the international field (Schinke et al., 2018). Besides competitiveness, sports policies also influence the overall health of people through exercise and means of children's sporting activities, crime prevention, and urban regeneration (Collins, 2004; Shahmirzadi et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding and instituting effective sports policies is critical to developing a viable and thriving sporting landscape.

Politics and sports interplay involves governmental systems of financing mechanisms, legislation, and institutional support (Seippel & Belbo, 2021). Governments influence sports through monetary subsidies, infrastructure, legislation, and educational integration (Bradbury et al., 2024). The degree of this intervention varies significantly depending on the political system, with some systems prioritizing centralized provision and others decentralized approaches (Agrawal et al., 2022). These political differences create different approaches to identifying sporting talent, resource allocation, and performance measurement across sporting environments (Faber et al., 2022; Hauser et al., 2024).

Sports governance also reflects larger political environments, with differences between democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid systems (Begović, 2022). Democratic nations generally promote more decentralized systems with independent federations, private-public partnerships, and a combination of grass-roots and elite development (Begović, 2022). Authoritarian systems apply centralized systems and selective resource allocation (Meng et al., 2023). Hybrid systems borrow from both systems, generating configurations indicative of their political systems (Ghosh & Wolf, 2021). The systems shape athlete career paths, financial support, performance expectations, and international sporting performance differently. However, regime type alone is an insufficient explanatory variable: substantial variation in sport policy performance exists within each regime category, and similar regime types frequently produce divergent outcomes. This suggests that the causal weight lies less in the formal political system than in underlying governance capacities through which policies are designed, funded, and delivered.

Beyond competitive performance, sporting policies also have broader societal impacts, promoting economic growth from sporting industries and demographic group social mobility (Zhou et al., 2023). Well-developed sporting systems can facilitate elite performance and expand access for underserved populations (Ferguson, 2022). In addition, targeted sporting investments promote cross-cultural exchange opportunities (Su et al., 2024). The benefits of reliable sports policies impact overall public health, urban and regional growth, and international diplomacy.

Despite extensive research on national sporting systems and comparisons between various sporting systems, there remains an inconclusive understanding of how general political systems shape sporting policy under varying governance systems. Studies have explored country-specific research and comparisons between similar economic environments (Dowling & Harris, 2022). What is still missing, therefore, is closer scrutiny of how governance arrangements and the sporting approaches attached to them are connected at a fundamental level. This study will compare sporting governance systems, financing systems, and policy practices and their impacts on sports performance, grass-roots development, and athlete well-being.

## Analytical Framework: From Regime Types to Governance Capacity

To move beyond a descriptive regime-type contrast, this review adopts a governance-capacity framework in which democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid systems are treated as shaping conditions rather than direct causes. Five mechanism-level dimensions structure the analysis: (1) state capacity—the administrative and fiscal ability of government to formulate and resource sport policy; (2) arm’s-length accountability—the degree to which delivery bodies operate at a distance from direct political control while remaining answerable for results; (3) federation autonomy—the independence of national and regional sport federations in priority-setting and resource use; (4) policy coherence—the alignment of objectives and instruments across levels of governance and between elite and grassroots agendas; and (5) implementation capability—the coordination mechanisms, monitoring systems, and stakeholder engagement required to translate policy into delivery. Regime types pattern these dimensions in characteristic ways—centralized systems typically combine high state capacity with low federation autonomy, while decentralized systems exhibit the reverse—but it is the configuration of capacities, rather than regime type per se, that the synthesis treats as explanatory.

## Research Questions and Contributions

Building on SPLISS and related comparative frameworks (De Bosscher et al., 2006; 2009; 2015), this review extends the focus beyond elite determinants to system-level governance across regime types and updates evidence through 2024. We contribute by: (1) mapping how regime-type-specific governance and funding mixes relate to both elite performance and participation; (2) integrating equity and safeguarding into the comparative lens; and (3) employing a structured thematic synthesis to identify recurrent configurations linking funding intensity to performance and participation outcomes, and implementation barriers to delivery failure.

*RQ1. How do democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid regimes configure the five governance-capacity dimensions (state capacity, arm’s-length accountability, federation autonomy, policy coherence, implementation capability), and how do these configurations shape sport governance structures?*

*RQ2. Which funding mechanisms (public tax, lottery, mixed models) are most consistently associated with elite results and grassroots participation?*

*RQ3. Which policy instruments (athlete/coach support, facilities, talent pathways) show the strongest links to international success?*

*RQ4. What cross-national barriers (fragmentation, conflicts, corruption, resource limits) most commonly impede implementation and equity goals?*

## Methodology

This review follows the PRISMA 2020 guidance for reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021), and the corresponding checklist accompanies the manuscript as supplementary material. Because the evidence is synthesized in a largely qualitative, configurational manner, the way the synthesis is documented also drew on the ENTREQ statement (Tong et al., 2012).

## *Identification and Selection of Studies*

Peer-reviewed empirical work on sport governance arrangements, financing structures, and the delivery of sport policy around the world was located through systematic searches of Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, Wiley Online Library, EBSCOhost, Taylor & Francis Online, and ScienceDirect.

### *Search Strategy*

Seven electronic platforms were interrogated—Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, Wiley Online Library, EBSCOhost, ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, and ScienceDirect—without any lower date limit, so that every record indexed up to the final search date of 15 September 2025 was captured.

The search strategy combined policy-oriented terms using Boolean operators: (“sport policy” OR “sport governance” OR “sport regulation” OR “sport law” OR “elite sport policy” OR “sport development” OR “sport funding”)

Where platform functionality allowed, queries were run against titles, abstracts, and author keywords, with truncation applied so that singular and plural forms (sport/sports) were both captured; syntax and field tags were tailored to each database. Table 1 sets out the exact query used in each platform alongside the corresponding record counts.

The search strategy was intentionally anchored in policy-level terminology, reflecting the review’s focus on sport policy design, governance arrangements, funding systems, and policy implementation. Studies from adjacent areas—including participation, safeguarding, athlete development, and inclusion—were eligible where these topics were examined within a sport policy or governance framework rather than as standalone social or developmental phenomena.

To broaden coverage, the bibliographies of every study retained at full text were checked by hand for further candidate records. Eligibility was confined to English-language articles appearing in peer-reviewed journals. Detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria are reported below.

### *Study Selection*

All citations were imported into Zotero, whose built-in functions signal retracted papers and probable duplicates; flagged entries were then checked and consolidated by hand before screening commenced.

**Table 1.** Database-specific search strategies and records retrieved

Database	Records Retrieved
Web of Science	446
EBSCO host	439
ScienceDirect	372
Taylor & Francis	283
Wiley Online Library	122
IEEE Xplore	274
ERIC	23
Total	1959

Selection unfolded in two phases: an initial pass over titles and abstracts using the pre-specified criteria, followed by full-text appraisal of the records that survived this first filter. All screening was conducted by the author. Where eligibility was unclear, the study was set aside and re-examined against the inclusion criteria at a later point before a final decision was made, and borderline cases were resolved conservatively by retaining them for full-text assessment.

The searches returned 1,959 records in total; once 147 duplicates had been discarded, 1,812 entered title-and-abstract screening, at which stage 1,733 were judged ineligible. Of the 79 reports subsequently sought, five proved unobtainable, leaving 74 for full-text appraisal. Forty of these were removed—23 fell outside the sport-policy focus, four were opinion pieces, and 13 were reviews—so the final corpus comprised 34 studies. Figure 1 traces each step of this process.

## *Eligibility Criteria*

### *Inclusion Criteria*

Eligible studies examined sport governance arrangements, financing systems, or the implementation of sport policy. Screening decisions were guided by an adapted version of the SPIDER framework—Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type (Methley et al., 2014). SPIDER was preferred to the PICOS model that dominates intervention research for two reasons: the review brings together qualitative and quantitative evidence, and its questions concern policy settings rather than clinical or experimental comparisons. Unlike PICOS, which is primarily suited to intervention-based trials, SPIDER offers greater flexibility for framing research questions around complex social phenomena, such as sports governance and policy processes, and accommodates diverse study designs including case studies, comparative analyses, and thematic syntheses. This alignment with the review's emphasis on exploring variations in governance structures, funding mechanisms, and inclusivity across political systems makes SPIDER a more methodologically appropriate choice. SPIDER was therefore applied exclusively throughout the eligibility assessment.

Operationally, the five SPIDER elements were specified as follows:

**Sample:** International and national sports governing bodies, individual athletes, coaching staff, sports organizations, federations, policymakers, administrators, and development programs involved in the sporting regulations.

**Phenomenon of Interest:** Sports governance models, funding frameworks, policy implementation approaches, elite performance development systems, grassroots sports development initiatives, and athlete support strategies.

**Design:** qualitative studies, mixed-methods research, quantitative, and comparative analyses.

**Evaluation:** Effectiveness of governance models, the impact of funding frameworks, and the success of policy implementation.

**Research type:** peer-reviewed original research, primary qualitative studies, mixed-methods studies, policy evaluation papers, and implementation studies.

### *Exclusion Criteria*

Letters, editorials, conference abstracts, commentaries, and any text not available in English were removed at this stage, as were protocols, earlier reviews, and meta-analyses.

### *Methodological Quality Assessment*

Methodological quality was appraised with a version of the Cochrane risk-of-bias instrument that we modified to suit non-interventional policy scholarship (McGuinness, 2020), acknowledging

that the original tool was built for randomized trials. Design-specific checklists such as CASP and the MMAT were weighed as alternatives, but the corpus mixes qualitative, quantitative, comparative, and multi-method designs, and applying separate instruments would have produced ratings that could not be set against one another. A single adapted domain structure was therefore retained, with the signalling questions rewritten to strip out intervention-specific content and to address instead: the clarity of stated objectives (D1), the appropriateness and transparency of participant or case selection (D2), how outcomes were assessed (D3), and how reported results were selected (D4). Within each domain a study was judged to carry either low or unclear risk, and these domain scores were then aggregated into an overall rating.

### ***Data Selection and Extraction***

Relevant information was charted in a Microsoft Excel 2019 spreadsheet, capturing for every paper its identifier, setting, design, policy focus, the role government plays in sport, associated development programmes, stated aims, and principal findings. Regime classification followed established comparative-politics indicators rather than the authors' own judgement, and was operationalized using the categorical classifications of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index. The EIU index was selected for its annual coverage, explicit categorical thresholds, and established use in comparative sport policy research (Jedlicka et al., 2020), which renders the coding transparent and replicable. Two caveats apply. First, the index embodies a particular—and contested—conceptualization of political systems; alternative measures (e.g., V-Dem, Polity V) draw category boundaries differently, and the regime labels are therefore employed here strictly as analytic shorthand for replicable coding rather than as normative characterizations of any country. Second, consistent with the governance-capacity framework adopted in this review, regime categories function as contextual conditions rather than explanatory variables, so the substantive conclusions do not hinge on the validity of any single classificatory scheme. Countries rated as full or flawed democracies were coded as democratic, those rated as hybrid regimes as hybrid, and those rated as authoritarian regimes as authoritarian. Classification was based on the index edition closest to the period examined by each included study; where a study covered multiple periods, the classification prevailing for the majority of the study window was applied, and for studies predating the first edition of the index (2006), the 2006 edition was used. Multi-country studies were coded according to the predominant regime category of the contexts examined; studies spanning categorically different contexts were coded as mixed. Under this scheme, 27 of the 34 included studies were coded to democratic contexts, three in authoritarian contexts, one in a hybrid context, and three in mixed contexts.

### ***Data Analysis***

Extracted data were synthesized using structured thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Coding proceeded in two cycles: a deductive cycle applying the five governance-capacity dimensions of the analytical framework as a priori categories, followed by an inductive cycle in which open codes were generated for patterns not captured by the framework (e.g., gender-equity trajectories, public trust in policy adoption). Codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were then tested for internal coherence and cross-case consistency by systematically comparing studies across regime types, funding models, and development contexts. Divergent or contradictory findings were retained and are reported as boundary conditions rather than suppressed. Quantitative results reported by individual studies (e.g., funding levels, medal returns, participation rates) were extracted and used descriptively to contextualize the thematic findings; statistical pooling was not attempted, because designs, outcome definitions, and measurement strategies varied too widely to be combined in any meaningful way.

## Results

### Study Selection

The selection pathway, from 1,959 initially retrieved records down to the 34 studies entering the synthesis, is summarized in Figure 1. The characteristics of the 34 included studies are summarized in Table 2.

### Methodological Quality Assessment

Across the four appraisal domains—clarity of objectives, selection of participants or cases, outcome assessment, and the reporting of results—the evidence base performed well. Thirty of the 34 studies received a low overall rating; the remaining four (Dashper et al., 2019; Fahlén & Skille, 2016; Jedlicka et al., 2020; Mäkinen et al., 2016) were classed as unclear, in most instances because their case-selection procedures were thinly documented (D2). No study was rated high risk, and quality played no part in inclusion decisions. Domain-level and aggregate judgements are visualized in Figures 2 and 3.

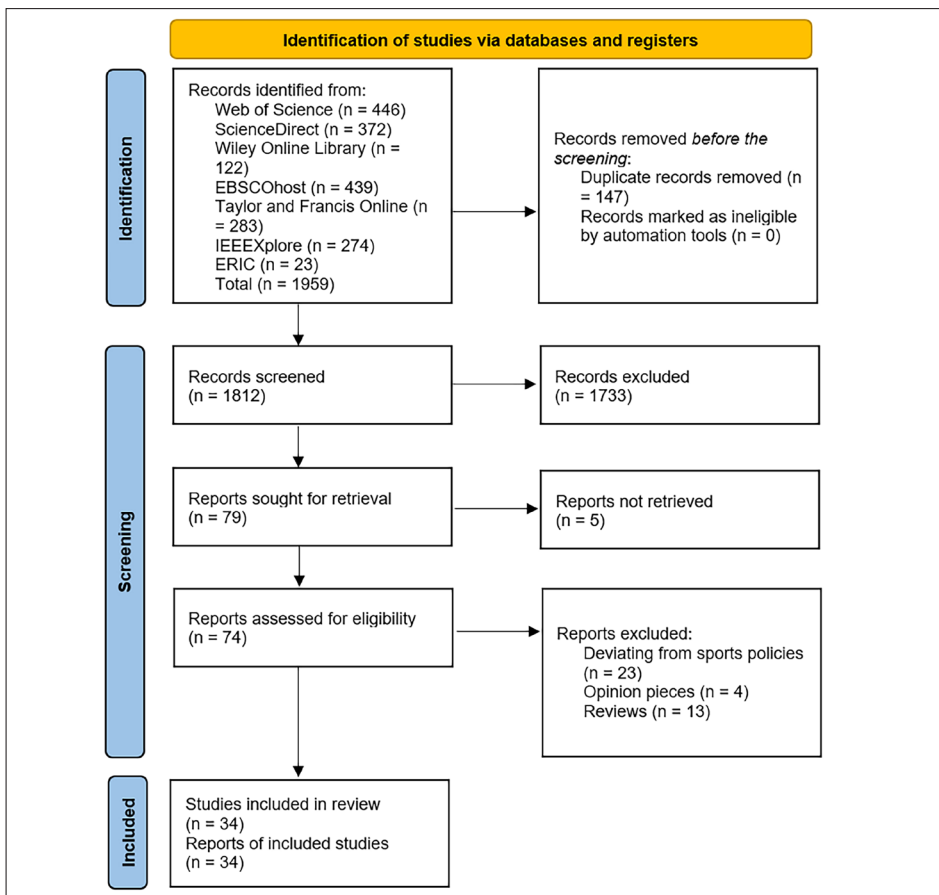


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021)

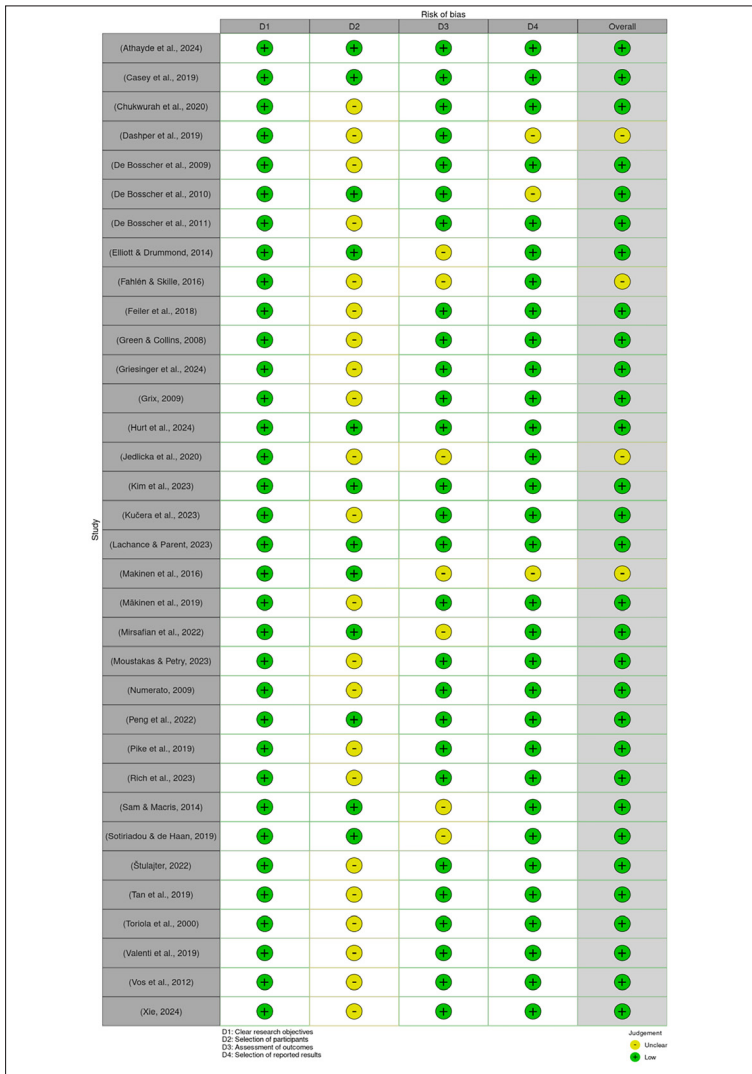
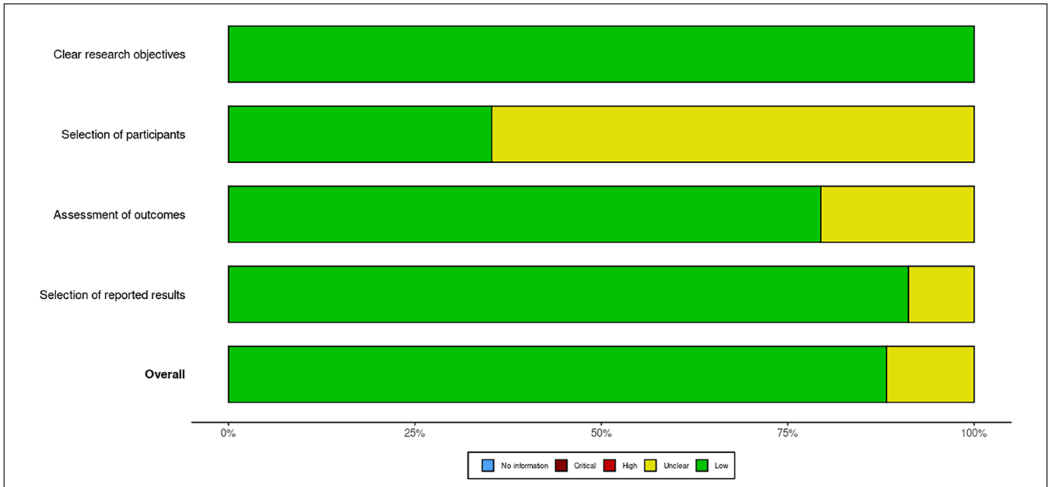


Figure 2. Traffic lights plot of the risk of bias assessment

**Thematic Analysis of Outcomes**

Themes are organized according to the governance-capacity framework, with regime type treated as a contextual condition. To facilitate a clearer comparative understanding of key policy features, Table 3 summarizes the main differences between centralized and decentralized sports policy systems across governance, funding, inclusivity, adaptability, and performance outcomes.

Read through the governance-capacity framework, centralized systems typically pair high state capacity with low federation autonomy and weak arm’s-length accountability, producing strong elite-focused coherence but fragile implementation capability where local engagement is required; decentralized systems invert this configuration, trading central coherence for autonomy and adaptive implementation. As shown in Table 3, centralized systems often achieve rapid elite performance gains through concentrated resources and unified governance, yet may struggle to



**Figure 3.** Summary plot of the risk of bias assessment

ensure inclusivity and grassroots development. In contrast, decentralized systems offer greater adaptability and community engagement, though elite success is more uneven and dependent on local capacities. These findings suggest that political structure shapes not only funding patterns and governance efficiency, but also how systems trade immediate elite gains against forms of participation that can be sustained over time.

***Governance Configurations across Regime Types***

Addressing RQ1, the synthesis identified substantial variation in governance configurations across political systems, particularly in relation to state capacity, federation autonomy, accountability arrangements, policy coherence, and implementation capability. The responsibility for defining and implementing sports policy varies across countries. In Denmark, the Ministry of Culture plays a central role in setting sports policy objectives (Štulajter, 2022). On the other hand, Finland’s sports policy direction is legally defined, and the government, along with relevant ministries, sets specific policy objectives, while in Sweden, the role is performed by the Ministry of Culture and the parliament. In Norway, steering responsibility is shared: policy direction emerges jointly from the state and from NIF, the confederation uniting the country’s Olympic and Paralympic sport (Štulajter, 2022).

Portugal’s sports legislation is mainly regulatory, with more than 60% of the rules focusing on legal systems governing professional sports practice, management, and training (Athayde et al., 2024). On the other hand, Pele Law (1998) of Brazil establishes general sports regulations, shaping the legal landscape for sports administration. A pivotal moment in Australia’s pursuit of medal-winning elites came in 1981, when the federal government created the Australian Institute of Sport; four years later the Labor government added the Australian Sports Commission as the conduit for Commonwealth funding (Green & Collins, 2008). The payoff registered clearly in Olympic returns: from a mere five medals at Montreal in 1976, before the AIS existed, the national haul climbed to 58 at Sydney in 2000 and 49 at Athens (Green & Collins, 2008).

Finnish sports policy networks underwent significant structural transformations between 1989 and 2017, shifting governance models, changing power distributions, and evolving centralization levels (Mäkinen et al., 2019). However, a core group of actors retained influence, and the

**Table 2.** Study characteristics

Study	Study Settings	Study design	Sports Policy Focus	Government Role in Sports	Sports Development Programs	Study Purpose	Findings
Athayde et al., 2024	Brazil, Portugal	Qualitative exploratory study	General rules of sport, regulatory framework, mega-events, funding	Brazil: Focus on financing; Portugal: Focus on regulation	Regulatory frameworks, sports management training, funding mechanisms	To analyze and compare sports legislation in Brazil and Portugal, focusing on legal frameworks, regulatory structures, and governance models	Brazil prioritizes funding, while Portugal emphasizes regulation; Mega-events influence legislation in both countries
Casey et al., 2019	Australia	Mixed-method analysis	Encouraging female sport participation	Infrastructure development, gender equity policies	Modified sports programs, social and competitive formats	To examine trends in female sports participation and identify challenges in community sports	Sports participation increased among females and males, but a substantial increase was observed in females aged 4 to 9 years, the standard entry age into organized sports through modified programs and general competition-structured formats
Chukwurah et al., 2020	Nigeria	Qualitative study	Gender equality in sports (Nigeria Sports Policy, AU Agenda 2063)	Enforcing gender equity	No effective programs addressing gender disparities	To examine gender inequity in media coverage and the welfare of national teams	Gender superiority beliefs contribute to inequalities. Many female athletes change their nationalities due to poor conditions. National sports policies have not effectively bridged the gender gap
Dashper et al., 2019	Wales	Qualitative study	Policies addressing participation disparities among BME groups	Limited recognition of diversity within BME communities	Need for nuanced and targeted strategies	To investigate reasons for (non-) participation in sports among BME communities	Policies often treat BME groups as homogeneous, failing to address intra-group differences
De Bosscher et al., 2009	Six Nations (UK, Italy, Netherlands, Canada, Norway, Belgium)	Pilot study	Elite Sport Policy and International Success	Financial Support, Training Facilities, Coaching Development, Athlete Support	National Sports Policies, Financial Resources, Athlete and Post-Career Support, Training Facilities	To explore the relationship between elite sport policy systems and success in international competitions	Financial resources, athlete support, training facilities, and coach development are key factors for elite sports success; Belgium lags in policy and performance, while the UK and Italy show strong outcomes.
De Bosscher et al., 2010	Six Nations (UK, Italy, Netherlands, Canada, Norway, Belgium)	Mixed methods	Elite sport policy effectiveness and national competitiveness	Governmental support for elite sports varies by nation	Nine sport policy dimensions (pillars) assessed	To develop a theoretical model to compare elite sport policies and measure determinants of success	Higher positive scores in the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom indicate that the sports governing bodies in these countries are fully committed to developing sports at the elite level
De Bosscher et al., 2011	Belgium	Longitudinal policy evaluation design with a mixed-methods approach	Effectiveness of Elite Sports Policy	High government funding (over 80% of the total elite sports budget)	Increased investment in elite sports after 2004, influenced by declining performances	To develop a framework for assessing elite sports policy effectiveness	Despite increased spending, performance did not rise proportionally; policy effectiveness varied based on different evaluation models (goals model, system resource approach, and process approach)

**Table 2.** Study characteristics (continue)

Study	Study Settings	Study design	Sports Policy Focus	Government Role in Sports	Sports Development Programs	Study Purpose	Findings
Elliott & Drummond, 2014	South Australia	Qualitative study	Code of conduct policy in junior Australian football	Not specified	Code of conduct implementation and discussions with parents	To examine attitudes and perceptions toward the code of conduct in junior Australian football	The code of conduct is perceived as a positive step but has limited effectiveness in altering entrenched parental behavior
Fahlén & Skille, 2016	Sweden and Norway	Policy analysis using the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)	Sport for all, Indigenous sports policy	Sweden: Stronger coalition between Ministry of Culture and RF; Norway: More inclusive, recognizing Sami sport's right to funding since 2005	Norway provides public funding for Sami sports (SVL-N), while Sweden integrates Sami sports into general sports policy via RF	To explore how political coalitions, social structures, and institutions affect the organization and exercise of Sami sport	Norway's inclusive state policy creates better participation opportunities for Sami sports than Sweden's approach, which maintains the status quo by reinforcing existing structures
Feiler et al., 2018	Germany	Three-wave balanced panel study	Funding allocation based on policy regulations	Distribution of subsidies at sports organization, state, and community levels	Youth promotion, competitive sports support, and public facility funding.	To examine if funding principles set by sports policies at different governmental levels in Germany are associated with voluntary sports clubs' actual receipt of subsidies	Funding in Germany was observed to follow a structured approach where clubs with more members receive more subsidies. Moreover, clubs using public facilities benefit from increased funding, whereas clubs seeking subsidies for health sports or broader inclusion initiatives struggle
Green & Collins, 2008	Australia and Finland	Case Study	Australia: Elite Sport, Finland: Sport for All	Australia: Federal Government prioritizing elite sport; Finland: Focus on mass participation	Australia: Programs targeting school children, women, and Indigenous Australians	To analyze national sports development policy in two countries with distinct political and sporting traditions	Australia follows elite sports development, while Finland maintains a mass participation focus despite policy discussions
Griesinger et al., 2024	Germany	Quantitative Content Analysis	Talent Development and Promotion Policies	Recognizes the autonomy of sports organizations in defining talent development policies	Talent Development Goals include Long-Term Sporting Development.	To examine how talent development goals in sports policy documents align with scientific recommendations and how they differ between key actors	Talent development goals are fragmented; DOSB aligns with holistic goals, but regional confederations and sports federations show gaps in knowledge transfer
Grix, 2009	United Kingdom	Qualitative policy analysis	Modernization of National Governing Bodies (NGBs)	Increased involvement of UK government and agencies in sports governance	Implementation of 'New Managerialism' to professionalize UK Athletics	To analyze the impact of UK sports policy on the governance of athletics in the UK	UK Athletics shifted from grassroots accountability to top-down governance by UK Sport, focusing on business-like management with set targets; grassroots clubs lost decision-making influence
Hurt et al., 2024	Austria	Data-driven simulation model	Public subsidies for sports clubs	Allocation of government funds based on socio-economic factors	Football club funding strategies	To evaluate optimal government funding allocation strategies for maximizing children's access to sports facilities	Optimized funding strategies based on socio-economic indicators can improve participation by up to 117% compared to traditional funding approaches

**Table 2.** Study characteristics (continue)

Study	Study Settings	Study design	Sports Policy Focus	Government Role in Sports	Sports Development Programs	Study Purpose	Findings
Jedlicka et al., 2020	Qatar, Lebanon, and the United Kingdom	Comparative Analysis	Influence of political regime type on sports policy	Varies by regime type (autocracy, partial democracy, full democracy)	Elite sports programs and social development initiatives	To examine how regime type shapes sports policy development and government involvement in sports	Regime type affects the policy approach and efficacy; while all states use sports for political purposes, the implementation varies significantly
Kim et al., 2023	Korea	Quantitative study using an online questionnaire survey	Trust in sports policies, policy content, policy satisfaction, and sports participation intention	Formulation and implementation of COVID-19-related sports policies	Policies aimed at regulating sports participation during COVID-19, including facility closures and restrictions	To identify the effect of trust in and contents of sports-related policies on policy satisfaction and examine the relationship between policy satisfaction and sports participation intention	Policy trust (consistency, expertise, prior performance) positively influenced satisfaction. Social equity, market responsiveness, and policy effectiveness positively affected policy satisfaction. Sports policy satisfaction negatively affected the intention to participate in sports
Kučera et al., 2023	Multicenter (Europe)	Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA)	Public sports funding efficiency	Allocation of public funds to sports	National-level sports participation and Olympic performance programs	To assess efficiency in sports funding for public engagement and international representation	Most EU countries are inefficient in sports funding, with inefficient spending observed in some nations like Portugal
Lachance & Parent, 2023	Canada	Qualitative Study	Bilingualism in Sport Governance	Sport Canada's funding and enforcement of language policies	Financial support for bilingual services (CAD 10,000)	To explore the implementation of the Official Languages Act and its impact on collaboration between NSOs and Quebec P/TSOs	Successful implementation was characterized by NSOs ensuring bilingual accessibility of policy documents on their websites and maintaining consistency in format and content across French and English
Mäkinen et al., 2016	Finland	longitudinal policy analysis	Shift from corporatist to performance-based funding	Increased government control over sports federations	Youth sports, elite sports, adult sports, adapted physical activities	Analyze the impact of performance-based financing and structural reforms on national sports federations	Performance-based funding initially increased youth sports investments but had little effect in the 2000s; sports federations prioritized elite and adult sports
Mäkinen et al., 2019	Finland	longitudinal social network analysis	Governance models of central sports organizations	Strong influence via policy networks, working groups, and structural changes	Transition from sports organizations to state-controlled programs promoting general physical activity	To examine structural changes in Finnish sport policy network and governance models over time	The core policy network remained centralized despite structural changes; shifts in governance led to state-controlled programs
Mirsafian et al., 2022	Iran	Quasi-experimental	Sports law education for coaches	Not specified	Educational intervention for coaches	To measure the effects of an educational intervention on sports law concepts on coaches' attitudes, knowledge, and behavior	The intervention significantly improved coaches' attitudes, knowledge, and behavior regarding sports law, with lasting effects observed for 12 weeks after the intervention

**Table 2.** Study characteristics (continue)

Study	Study Settings	Study design	Sports Policy Focus	Government Role in Sports	Sports Development Programs	Study Purpose	Findings
Moustakas & Petry, 2023	Multicenter (Europe)	Qualitative study with document analysis and semi-structured interviews	Safeguarding policy in sport	Advocacy for safeguarding in sport	Awareness campaigns, expert consultations	To analyze the inputs, activities, and policy outcomes of the CoE's safeguarding policy efforts in sport	CoE legitimized safeguarding policies, engaged policymakers and the public, and developed roadmaps, but lacked systematic policy monitoring and material resources
Numerato, 2009	Czech Republic	Qualitative study	Development of regional public sports policies since 2001	Decentralized regional policies	Grant programs, subsidies, and support for youth sports	Analyze the creation and implementation of regional sports policies and the role of government and voluntary sports organizations	Structural (politicization, bureaucratization, lack of evidence-based policymaking, poor interaction) and cognitive (lack of knowledge, low recognition of sports, negative public image) constraints hinder effective regional sports policy implementation
Peng et al., 2022	China	Case study using semi-structured interviews	Youth football development following 2015 national football reform	Allocation of funds by the government towards youth football	Three pathways: (1) School-based programs led by MoE, (2) National Youth Football Training Centres led by CFA, and (3) Professional football clubs required to develop youth teams	To assess how contextual and organizational factors influenced the implementation of Chinese youth football policies	Policy conflicts due to overlapping roles of MoE and CFA, mismatch of traditional values, emphasis on elite performance over participation, and lack of coordination among key stakeholders constrained effective policy implementation
Pike et al., 2019	USA	Mixed-methods study	Health and safety policies in secondary school athletics	Collaborative Solutions for Safety in Sport initiative	Collaborative Solutions for Safety in Sport initiative	To investigate the progress made by state secondary school leaders in implementing health and safety policies and explore barriers and strategies for implementation	89% of states reported progress in implementing health and safety policies; barriers included cost, misconceptions about policy content, and a false sense of security
Rich et al., 2023	Canada	Instrumental Case Study	Changing Role of Sport, Accountability and Responsibilization	Shifted across ministries (e.g., economic, health, tourism), with evolving responsibilities	Ontario Sport Action Plan and Access to Recreation for Ontarians Policy Framework	To explore the impact of regional policy on sports institutions and policy implementation	Administrative arrangements and beliefs shaped sports delivery, and accountability shifted to municipalities
Sam & Macris, 2014	USA, Germany	Case Study	Legalization and prohibition of online sports betting	Regulatory and enforcement measures in sports betting	Anti-gambling policies by sports leagues	Examine factors leading to prohibition of online sports wagering in Germany and the USA	Differences in policy enforcement, the role of courts, the influence of sports governing associations, and external pressures on regulation

**Table 2.** Study characteristics (continue)

Study	Study Settings	Study design	Sports Policy Focus	Government Role in Sports	Sports Development Programs	Study Purpose	Findings
Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019	Australia and the Netherlands	Qualitative Study	Gender equity policies in sports governance	Indirect influence through constitutional and policy changes	Gender-neutral representation policies	To explore the role of board members in advancing gender equity in sport leadership	At the sport level, board members in the sports governing body influence broader governance structures through policy changes and constitutional reforms that institutionalize gender equity
Štulajter, 2022	Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden	Comparative Analysis	Sports governance and funding	Varies by country; ministries and government programs play different roles	State-supported sports clubs, infrastructure development, and funding programs	To examine the differences in sports policies and governance in Nordic countries	Scandinavian social model supports sports through public funding, but governance structures vary across countries
Tan et al., 2019	China	Qualitative study	Elite sports development and policy transfer	Strong government involvement; policies driven by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and General Administration of Sport (GAS)	'Invite In and Go Out' strategy, Strategic Olympic Glory Plan	To examine policy transfer in elite swimming, focusing on the rationale, actors, sources, elements, and conditioning factors	Factors propelling the policy transfer were poor performances at major international sports events and a desire to be successful at the home Olympic Games
Toriola et al., 2000	Botswana, Nigeria	Qualitative study	Botswana lacks a national youth sports policy; Nigeria has a youth sports policy but faces political and economic constraints	Botswana funds sports through grants to BNSC; Nigeria has defined management structures but faces political interference	Botswana: Poor coordination among NSAs, lack of full-time coaches; Nigeria: Better-defined programs but affected by economic instability	To evaluate and compare youth sports programs in Botswana and Nigeria	Policy gaps, funding issues, and a lack of facilities hinder Botswana's youth sports development. Nigeria's programs are structured but face political and economic challenges
Valenti et al., 2019	Multicenter (Europe)	Panel regression analysis	Elite sport policies and their impact on women's football success	Financial support, human resources, coaching provision, and foundation phase activity	Coaching expertise, financial investment, grassroots development	To examine the long-term impact of financial support, human resources, coaching provision, and grassroots activity on international success in women's football	Coaching provision significantly impacts success, while financial support, human resources, and grassroots activity show no significant effect
Vos et al., 2012	Flanders (Belgium) & Germany	Comparative analysis using panel surveys	Centralization of Sport for All policy	Public subsidies (Flanders: 70% of clubs receive, Germany: 75% of clubs receive)	Not specified	To analyze revenue composition and organizational dependencies of non-profit sports clubs	Flemish clubs depend more on public subsidies than German clubs, and multi-sports clubs tend to depend more on state income
Xie, 2024	United States, China, and Germany	Comparative Analysis	Sports Funding Allocation and Administration	Allocation of public funds to sports	Funding Strategies for Sports Development	To evaluate how each country allocates and administers sports funding and assess effectiveness	Findings contribute to refining funding models for better athletic and societal outcomes

**Table 3.** Key policy dimensions differentiating centralized and decentralized sports governance models

Policy Dimension	Centralized Systems	Decentralized Systems
Governance Structure	Strong top-down control by national government or central sports authority; unified decision-making	Multiple autonomous bodies (regional/provincial/local); shared or negotiated decision-making
Funding Mechanisms	Predominantly state-funded; stable but politically dependent; budget allocation directed by central priorities	Mixed funding from local governments, private sponsors, and community sources; allocation responsive to local needs
Policy Objectives	Rapid achievement of elite success; national prestige; centralized talent pipelines	Balanced development of elite and grassroots sports; local identity and community engagement
Resource Allocation	Concentrated in elite training centers and national teams; limited grassroots investment	Distributed across local facilities and programs; broader access for community participation
Inclusivity & Equity	Often limited attention to gender equity and minority inclusion unless mandated nationally	Greater potential for inclusivity through local initiatives, but dependent on regional priorities
Adaptability	Slower to adapt to local changes due to bureaucratic layers; more consistent nationwide	Flexible and adaptive to local contexts; may lead to uneven standards and performance levels
Performance Outcomes	Can deliver rapid elite performance gains; sustained success depends on political stability	May achieve more sustainable participation growth; elite success varies with local investment capacity

governance model transitioned from a sports organization-led system to a more state-controlled framework (Mäkinen et al., 2019). In another study, Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and Norway lack a comprehensive legal framework that governs sports activities and utilizes laws from different social sectors to regulate the legal aspects of sports (Štulajter, 2022). Finland stands apart as the only Nordic state to have codified sport comprehensively, through its Act on the Promotion of Sport and Physical Activity (Štulajter, 2022). Finnish policy has long privileged mass involvement in physical activity, an emphasis mirrored in the doubling of the national facility stock from 14,148 venues in 1964 to 29,280 by 2002 (Green & Collins, 2008). Moreover, three domain organizations and the Finnish sports federation were established as part of the change in umbrella organization in Finland. They were identified as responsible for elite sports, sports for all, and youth sports in Finland. In another study, youth sports development in Botswana and Nigeria was achieved through policies, institutional frameworks, and involvement of government structures (Toriola et al., 2000). Botswana utilizes a centralized approach, with the Botswana National Sports Commission (BNSC) overseeing sports policies. In contrast, Nigeria operates a decentralized model involving sports governance by the federal state and government contribution (Toriola et al., 2000).

Introduction of the New managerialism model, which involves corporate management principles to the UK Athletics (UKA), has reshaped UKA priorities, aligning them with financial and performance targets rather than the long-term development of athletics (Grix, 2009). Funding conditions imposed through UK Sport have narrowed UKA's agenda to Olympic-oriented performance targets, leaving the organization with scant room—and few resources—to confront the deeper causes of athletics' overall decline (Grix, 2009). Britain's governance architecture took its present medal-oriented shape after Team GB's disappointing showing at Atlanta in 1996; ever since, success at the Olympics and world championships has served as the organizing

priority (Jedlicka et al., 2020). This approach is supported by national governing bodies (NGBs) of sports, sports institutes, and higher education institutions, ensuring a systematic pipeline from grassroots to elite performance. Lebanon presents the opposite picture: jurisdiction is divided untidily between the youth-and-sport portfolio and the education ministry, producing fragmented and overlapping oversight. Political interference, particularly in basketball, led to international bans, limiting progress in competitive sports. Moreover, Lebanon's international sporting success is minimal, with limited Olympic achievements and reliance on diaspora athletes (Jedlicka et al., 2020). Financial limitations, a lack of structured elite programs, and political interference constrict sports development in Lebanon.

In both Sweden and Norway, sport policy is steered by a coalition of the state and a single umbrella body—RF (the Swedish Sports Confederation) in the former, NIF (the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports) in the latter (Fahlén & Skille, 2016). The two confederations nonetheless occupy different positions vis-à-vis government: RF effectively acts as the Swedish state's agent in distributing public sport funding, whereas NIF, although it absorbs the bulk of Norway's state resources, remains separated from the Ministry of Culture by a clearer arm's-length arrangement (Fahlén & Skille, 2016).

Advocacy by the Council of Europe has been instrumental in embedding safeguarding into European sport governance—the uptake of its Start to Talk initiative across 42 countries being the clearest evidence (Moustakas & Petry, 2023). Both Germany and Flanders follow a Rhineland welfare state model. However, differences in sports policy systems in the two regions influence financial dependencies (Vos et al., 2012). Sports policy systems in Flanders are more centralized, relying on public subsidies. In contrast, sports club in Germany operates in a more decentralized system, showing a higher reliance on third-sector income (Vos et al., 2012).

### ***Funding Mechanisms and Their Outcomes***

Addressing RQ2, the reviewed studies highlighted important differences in funding mechanisms, including public funding, lottery revenues, and mixed public–private models, and their associations with elite performance and grassroots participation. Brazil's legislation emphasizes funding, with 32% of its laws in sports focusing on financial mechanisms in high-performance sports (Athayde et al., 2024). The Pele law was found to address issues of the destination of public funds that are channeled to sports activities in Brazil in addition to establishing rules for entities that are eligible to receive public funds (Athayde et al., 2024). On the other hand, Portugal's Basic Law on Physical Activity and Sport (LBAFD) lacks a structural framework for revenue sources and allocation. Comparative scoring placed the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom at the top of the six-nation sample, signalling governing bodies firmly committed to elite development and unusually tight coordination of spending and activity (De Bosscher et al., 2010). British and Dutch federations benefit additionally from well-institutionalized support systems, while Norway's distinctive strength lies in concentrating its elite money on a small number of disciplines. Earlier work by the same team tied the Athens results of the UK, Italy, and the Netherlands directly to the scale of elite funding: Italy and the UK were the biggest spenders of 2004, committing €125 million and €90.3 million respectively (De Bosscher et al., 2009). Flanders offers a cautionary counterpoint: public outlays on elite sport doubled over 1999–2003 and rose a further 2.4-fold between 2004 and 2008, yet results at the European and World Championships and at the Olympic Games failed to keep pace with the money invested (De Bosscher et al., 2011).

Kučera et al. (2023) found national population size to move together with public sport expenditure, and expenditure in turn to track Olympic medal output. Germany, France, Sweden, and Poland exemplify the pattern, pairing heavy investment (79,238; 125,604; 25,031.5; and

18,936.5) with medal returns of 126, 90.49, 45.94, and 25.93 respectively; Portugal, committing €5,992.9 million for an average of just 0.83 medals, sits at the inefficient end of the distribution. Countries such as Germany, France, Sweden, and Poland invested heavily in sporting activities, raking in the most medals in the Olympics, with investments of 79238, 125604, 25031.5, and 18936.5 and medal returns of 126, 90.49, 45.94, and 25.93 (Kučera et al., 2023). On the other hand, Portugal was observed to channel fewer funds to sporting activities, which correlated with fewer medals in the Olympics. It invested 5992.9 million euros in return for 0.83 medals.

Across the Nordic region, public authorities underwrite most sporting activity, though through different channels. Sweden is unusual in financing sport directly out of tax revenue, an arrangement that hands its government a firmer grip on the sector than its neighbours possess (Štulajter, 2022); Denmark, Norway, and Finland draw chiefly on lottery proceeds. Administrative responsibility also varies: culture ministries handle state sport funding in Denmark and Finland, parliament and government share the task in Sweden, and in Norway the Ministry of Culture and the parliament each oversee separate funding streams (Štulajter, 2022). In Norway, funding responsibilities are divided between the Ministry of Culture and parliament, with each managing different sources of funding (Štulajter, 2022). The performance-based funding model in Finland strengthened government goal orientation towards sports and accountability in sports governance since their adoption in the 1990s (Makinen et al., 2016). However, this reform was followed by structural fragmentation as attempts to create a unified governing body failed, resulting in inefficiencies and a lack of coordination. Dissatisfaction with the system over time fueled ongoing reforms, with new governance models emerging since 2009 to address these challenges (Makinen et al., 2016). Youth sport in Botswana is financed through yearly government grants routed via the BNSC (Toriola et al., 2000); Nigeria, for all its economic weight, contends with erratic budgets, heavy dependence on private contributions, and corruption.

The United States utilizes a mixed public and private funding model, thus capitalizing on high levels of community engagement and corporate sponsorships, facilitating a broader base of sports development (Xie, 2024). On the other hand, China and Russia invested in elite sports through a centralized approach to sports funding. The UK used a strategic approach through government agencies and specialized sports institutions. The arrival of the National Lottery in 1994 transformed British sport finance and underpinned Team GB's subsequent gains in international competition (Jedlicka et al., 2020). Lebanon operates at the other extreme, piecing together modest state budgets with outside assistance from bodies such as the IOC—yet corrupt allocation practices have stunted both infrastructure and athlete support (Jedlicka et al., 2020). Unlike Lebanon, Qatar has a highly centralized and well-funded sports policy driven by the government's vision of becoming a global sports hub (Jedlicka et al., 2020).

The Sami Parliament in Sweden lacks direct influence over sports policies and funding allocations, reinforcing RF's control with the state funding for sports being centralized under RF, creating barriers for Sami sports organizations that are not integrated into RF (Fahlén & Skille, 2016). On the other hand, the Sami Parliament in Norway is more actively engaged in sports governance, advocating for Sami youth participation and cultural identity through sports, thus ensuring the allocation of gambling revenue to support Sami sports while also maintaining NIF's broader role in sports governance (Fahlén & Skille, 2016).

Funding in Germany was observed to follow a structured approach where clubs with a higher number of members receive more subsidies (Feiler et al., 2018). Moreover, clubs using public facilities benefit from increased funding, whereas clubs seeking subsidies for health sports or broader inclusion initiatives struggle. In Austria, simulation-based optimization of subsidy allocation lifted children's access to sports facilities by as much as 117% relative to the customary practice of spreading funds evenly (Hurt et al., 2024). Canadian instruments such as the SFAF

and Ontario's amateur-sport strategy attach firm governance conditions to public money; the SFAF in particular structures funding decisions and lays down rules designed to sharpen accountability and efficiency (Rich et al., 2023). The SFAF provides a framework for decisions concerning sports funding and outlines guidelines that enhance accountability and efficiency.

### ***Policy Instruments and International Success***

Addressing RQ3, the synthesis identified athlete support systems, training facilities, talent pathways, and coach development as the policy instruments most consistently associated with international sporting success. Nations that invest heavily in athletic and career support performed well in Athens, with the UK and the Netherlands, which achieved top ratings in athletic and career support, being ranked among the best-performing nations (De Bosscher et al., 2010). Moreover, countries that have invested in high-quality training centers and effective coaching structures performed better than others. Conversely, nations that lacked developed infrastructure, such as Belgium, performed poorly, emphasizing the need for investing in training environments and coaching standards (De Bosscher et al., 2010). In another study, all Scandinavian countries contributed to the creation of good structure of sports clubs where managers and coaches are dedicated to developing the sports skills of young people and children (Štulajter, 2022).

Specialized coaching emerged as the decisive policy lever in women's football: UEFA data show that the nations tipped for strong results were precisely those already employing expert coaches (Valenti et al., 2019). Financial backing, staffing levels, and foundation-phase activity, by contrast, explained none of the variation in national-team success—even though England, France, Norway, and Sweden routinely channel substantial resources into the women's game while Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro commit far less (Valenti et al., 2019). The CoE has contributed to athlete safety and coach education by developing training materials for safeguarding sports (Moustakas & Petry, 2023). These materials focus on legal frameworks, victim protection, awareness-raising, and best practices.

German clubs that commit heavily to youth work are rewarded accordingly—subsidies for the most engaged clubs ran 106% higher—and squad athletes likewise attract elevated direct and indirect support (Feiler et al., 2018). Responsibility for financing and framing both elite and junior-elite sport rests mainly with political actors, notably the federal interior ministry (BMI) and the conference of regional sport ministers (SMK), which gives these bodies an indirect hand in talent-development policy (Griesinger et al., 2024).

An educational programme on sports-law concepts delivered to Iranian coaches produced significant gains in attitude, knowledge, and behaviour, and these gains were still detectable twelve weeks after the training ended (Mirsafian et al., 2022). Implementing Official Languages Act's among national sports organizations (NSOs) in Canada showed varying degrees of success impacting collaboration dynamics with Quebec provincial/territorial sport organizations (P/TSOs) (Lachance & Parent, 2023). Successful implementation was characterized by NSOs ensuring bilingual accessibility of policy documents on their websites and maintaining consistency in format and content across French and English; out of 22 NSOs analyzed, 14 met these criteria, fostering positive collaboration through alignment in vision and willingness to work together (Lachance & Parent, 2023). In contrast, 8 NSOs failed to implement bilingual policies effectively, resulting in a negative collaborative experience.

### ***Implementation Barriers and Equity Outcomes***

Addressing RQ4, the reviewed studies revealed recurring implementation barriers—including policy fragmentation, stakeholder conflicts, resource constraints, and administrative complexity—as well as substantial variation in equity and inclusion outcomes across national contexts.

Structural and cognitive constraints hindered the effectiveness of Czech regional public sports policies (Numerato, 2009). Structural constraints include politicization, bureaucratization, lack of evidence-based decision-making, and insufficient stakeholder interaction. Cognitive obstacles, meanwhile, stemmed from deficits in knowledge and information, the marginal status accorded to sport on policy agendas, and an unflattering public image of the administration itself (Numerato, 2009). Botswana and Nigeria confronted a strikingly similar set of difficulties in rolling out youth sport: weak stakeholder involvement, underfunded and insufficient facilities, and too few qualified coaches at community level (Toriola et al., 2000). Welsh sports policy failed to address the specific challenges faced by Black and minoritized ethnic (BME) individuals, with the policies treating the BME community as an undifferentiated group failing to recognize the intra-group difference that affects participation in sporting activities (Dashper et al., 2019). Whether codes of conduct actually shift parental behaviour around children's sport depends heavily on wider social and cultural pressures (Elliott & Drummond, 2014). Chinese government spending has undoubtedly made youth football more accessible, yet fragmented structures, competing stakeholder interests, entrenched cultural attitudes, and limited resources continue to blunt the policy's implementation (Peng et al., 2022). In US secondary-school athletics, implementation faltered over cost, confusion between binding policy and mere recommendation, complacency about existing safety levels, and doubts about the value of changing course (Pike et al., 2019).

### ***Gender Equity and Inclusivity in Sports Policy and Funding***

Participation in Australia rose for both sexes, but the sharpest growth occurred among girls aged four to nine—the age band at which children typically enter organized sport, whether through modified programmes or conventional competition formats (Casey et al., 2019). VicHealth grants enabled state sporting organizations to expand community sport and active recreation with women and girls as the priority group, and two dedicated initiatives—“Change Our Game” and “Changing the Game”—were launched to lift female participation and push gender equality forward (Casey et al., 2019). Nigeria tells a different story: although gender equality is written into the national sports policy, with its promise of evenly shared benefits, the gulf between men's and women's teams has not narrowed in practice—and the African Union's Agenda 2063 has likewise left the gender balance of Nigerian sport untouched (Chukwurah et al., 2020).

In Germany, Clubs with high female membership and programs for disabled athletes were observed to receive substantial state funding, demonstrating a policy-driven incentive for inclusivity with an increase in funding by 134% (Feiler et al., 2018). Analysis of the multilevel framework revealed that at the sports level, board members in sports governing bodies influence broader governance structures through policy changes and constitutional reforms that institutionalize gender equity (Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019).

### ***Government Influence and Public Trust in Policy Adoption***

China's borrowing of elite swimming policy was propelled by earlier underperformance, anxieties over national prestige, and rivalry with Japan (Tan et al., 2019). The CCP's framing of elite success as a matter of national pride smoothed the transfer; Australia supplied the training template on the strength of its recent results; and officials within the GAS and the NAMC carried the changes through while administering centrally provided funds (Tan et al., 2019).

South Korean survey evidence shows public trust feeding into satisfaction with sport policy, with consistency exerting the strongest influence, followed by perceived expertise and the track record of earlier measures (Kim et al., 2023). The government's steady messaging on social distancing during COVID-19 deepened public comprehension of the rules, which in turn fostered favourable attitudes and greater satisfaction; new policies that were presented more clearly than

their predecessors had a similar effect (Kim et al., 2023).

Moreover, existing policy performance, due to the better presentation of the newly announced policies compared to previous policies, was positively associated with policy satisfaction.

## Discussion

### *Structural Dynamics of Sports Governance*

This study investigated global sports policies across different political systems, revealing significant patterns in implementation and effectiveness. The findings encompass various aspects of sports governance, funding mechanisms, athletic development, and social equity, demonstrating how different political systems approach sports development and administration. The findings demonstrate that governance structures—centralized versus decentralized—significantly shape sports policy implementation. Centralized models offer unified direction and resource concentration, facilitating rapid elite performance gains, while decentralized models provide adaptability and localized innovation. However, governance effectiveness depends less on regime type than on the configuration of governance capacities: the alignment of state capacity with federation autonomy, the presence of arm’s-length accountability arrangements, and the coherence of objectives across governance levels.

The research demonstrates contrasts between governance systems and policy frameworks between countries. The Nordic countries like Finland only have extensive sporting legislation (Štulajter, 2022). The movement of the United Kingdom towards corporate-style sporting governance shows a significant shift of approach, with countries such as Lebanon using fragmented governance systems (Jedlicka et al., 2020). The Council of Europe has been a significant force in policy development for protecting individuals in sporting settings, which demonstrates the international influence of national sporting policies (Moustakas & Petry, 2023).

### *Financial Architectures and Efficiency Considerations*

While the analysis confirms that higher investment levels are generally associated with stronger international performance, this relationship is not linear. Evidence suggests diminishing marginal returns when additional funding fails to address structural inefficiencies or coordination gaps. Effective funding strategies therefore require not only volume but also optimized allocation, cross-sectoral coordination, and mechanisms for monitoring impact. This reinforces the idea that policy success is as much about governance and management as it is about financial input. Funding mechanisms and resource allocation trends had prominent correlations with international sporting performance, national populations, and the availability of public funding. Large-populated nations, such as Sweden, France, and Germany, made heavy sporting investments (Štulajter, 2022). The range of financing models differs, with the Nordics drawing mainly on lottery systems, the United States on private and hybrid financing, and Russia and China on centralized systems. Finland’s performance-related financing had mixed experiences, and the institution of National Lottery financing in 1994 in the United Kingdom was a significant landmark for its sporting financing (Jedlicka et al., 2020).

### *Pathways for Athlete Development and Talent Sustainability*

Regarding improving athletic infrastructure, nations with large athlete support systems and

quality training centers, such as the UK and the Netherlands, performed better internationally. The quality of coaching experience also significantly improved female soccer, where professional coaching contributed more towards achievements than money. This finding supports human capital improvement in sporting excellence (Sato et al., 2021).

### ***Equity, Inclusivity, and Social Reach of Sports Policy***

Implementing equity and inclusivity policies has been unevenly effective across nations (Gardner et al., 2023). Some, such as Australia, have significantly improved female sporting participation. In contrast, others, such as Nigeria, continue not to narrow gaps between the sexes even with policy frameworks in place. Incentivizing inclusivity through more finances for more female member clubs and participants with disabilities in Germany represents a new policy solution for promoting inclusivity (Amin et al., 2023).

### ***Policy Transfer, Cultural Fit, and Theoretical Implications***

Critical analysis of the findings illustrates complex policy design-implementation linkages. Some policies have suitable structures, yet their implementation levels are low due to other factors. The impact of political systems is prominent, with democratic systems focusing more on equitable growth between elite and mass sports. Authoritarian systems, however, had more significant short-term elite sporting accomplishments, with general participation being sacrificed. Hybrid systems generally suffer from policy coherence and implementation problems.

Though more-funded countries performed better globally, instances such as Belgium indicated more significant expenditure without prioritized expenditure, which did not correlate proportionally with better performance. Performance was more directly associated with the governance-capacity dimensions identified in the analytical framework: policy coherence across governance levels, functioning accountability systems, implementation capability grounded in stakeholder coordination, and balanced prioritization of elite and grassroots development. The Belgian case thus exemplifies a coherence deficit rather than a funding deficit, while cases such as Nigeria reflect constraints in state capacity and implementation capability despite formally adequate policy frameworks.

Cultural and contextual factors significantly contributed to policy effectiveness. Nordic countries' success builds on strong community sports traditions, while Chinese policy transfer in swimming succeeded partly due to cultural emphasis on national prestige. In addition, the UK's shift to corporate management principles reflected broader public sector reforms, demonstrating how sports policies often mirror broader societal changes. An emerging frontier that traditional comparative frameworks have yet to fully accommodate is the digital transformation of sport, particularly the rise of e-sports. E-sports governance challenges the state-centric assumptions underlying regime-based analysis: regulatory authority is shared among private game publishers, transnational platforms, and national bodies, producing hybrid governance arrangements that cut across the democratic-authoritarian distinction. Notably, regime type still shapes responses—some states have moved to formally recognize and centrally regulate e-sports as part of national digital-economy strategy, while others leave it largely to market and federation-led self-regulation. Integrating digital and e-sports governance into comparative sports policy research would test whether the regime-sensitive patterns identified in this review extend to domains where the state does not own the underlying competitive infrastructure.

### ***Study Strengths and Limitations***

The study exhibits several strengths, including comprehensive geographical coverage, representation of diverse political systems, examination of multiple sports policy dimensions, and incorporation of quantitative and qualitative data. It demonstrates methodological rigor in the systematic review approach, multiple database sources, a structured analysis framework, and clear inclusion/exclusion criteria. The study's temporal span embraces long-term policy history and several rounds of reforms and offers a helpful historical background.

However, the research also has some limitations. There are gaps in data, particularly for developing nations, and lower outcomes. Moreover, there were challenges in distinguishing policy impacts from other factors, comparing political systems, and limited data for some regions. Three methodological limitations warrant emphasis. First, the search strategy was anchored in policy-level terminology; although reference-list screening partially mitigated this, studies from adjacent literatures—comparative governance, SPLISS-based analyses, sport-for-development, safeguarding, and participation research—not indexed under policy terms may have been missed, and the findings should be read as representative of the policy-focused literature rather than exhaustive of all related fields. Second, screening and quality appraisal were conducted by a single author; although uncertain cases were set aside and re-examined before final decisions and borderline cases were resolved conservatively, the absence of independent dual review introduces a risk of selection and assessment bias. Third, quality appraisal relied on an adapted version of a tool originally developed for randomized trials; although the adaptation is described transparently, instruments purpose-built for qualitative and mixed-methods research may have yielded different judgements. Finally, the evidence base is weighted toward established Western democracies (27 of 34 studies), while the authoritarian and hybrid categories rest on a comparatively small number of cases. All findings should therefore be interpreted as observational associations identified across heterogeneous study designs rather than causal effects of regime type, and the patterns reported for non-democratic contexts in particular should be treated as provisional.

### ***Study Implications***

The findings suggest significant consequences for policy development and implementation. The study suggests developing flexible frameworks for responding to varying environments locally and maintaining strict assessment mechanisms. Effective sporting policies must reconcile elite and grassroots levels of advancement, short and long-term objectives, and centralized and regional levels of governance. The implementation methods should apply reliable coordination mechanisms between governance levels, foster equitable and fair financing methods, and apply systems of surveillance and testing.

Subsequent inquiry might usefully track how distinct governance arrangements play out over extended horizons, alongside the record of inclusivity policies, the contribution of private actors, and what the digital transformation means for sporting development. Methods for developing normalized measurement indicators need to be improved, as well as more longitudinal studies, greater representation from developing countries, and more rigorous frameworks for comparisons.

The study underlines the importance of evidence-based policy-making with stakeholder consultations and context and capacity for practical purposes. Technical assistance, general guidelines, knowledge exchange mechanisms, and monitoring systems are critical for effective policy implementation. Reliable policy-making and policy execution in sports call for consideration of the domestic determinants of politics, culture, and economy and prioritization of elite performance and societal benefits from sport.

## Conclusion

Synthesizing evidence across political regimes, this research situates sport policy within a system that links governance arrangements, financing modalities, policy instruments, and implementation conditions to both elite performance and broader participation and equity outcomes. The analysis advances the literature in three respects. First, it develops a regime-sensitive comparative frame that clarifies why policy configurations cluster and how they are conditioned by administrative capacities and political incentives. Second, it shifts emphasis from single inputs to configuration effects: stable public or lottery financing appears necessary but not sufficient unless combined with coach development, athlete support, facility standards, and credible accountability mechanisms. Third, by bringing inclusion and safeguarding alongside performance metrics, the research shows that similar spending envelopes can yield divergent distributive outcomes, often mediated by fragmentation, conflicts of interest, corruption risks, and delivery capacity; these patterns are understood throughout as observational associations rather than causal estimates.

The findings carry several cautious implications for policy. Clearer allocation of responsibilities among ministries, umbrella bodies, and federations supported by arm's-length accountability may reduce coordination losses. Medium-term funding frameworks can limit volatility and enable planning, while investment strategies that pair resources with human-capital and facility quality tend to be more robust than single-lever approaches. In centralized settings, earmarking resources for grassroots participation and equity objectives may offset elite-performance bias; in decentralized settings, national minimum standards can help contain regional disparities. Conditioning public support on safeguarding and inclusion, accompanied by transparent monitoring, may strengthen legitimacy and delivery. Given contextual variation, incremental piloting and realist evaluation remain advisable before scale-up.

This research has limitations, including uneven geographical coverage, heterogeneity in indicators, and reliance on observational designs. Future work would benefit from longitudinal and subnational datasets, harmonized measures of participation and equity, and quasi-experimental tests of specific governance reforms under different regime constraints. Overall, the evidence points to durability in sport systems when financing stability, institutional clarity, delivery capability, and equity safeguards are treated as an integrated design problem rather than isolated levers.

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