

PRODUCING ATHLETIC SUCCESS: COMMUNISM, DEMOCRACY AND SPECIALISATION IN ATHLETICS (1984-2006)

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INTRODUCTION

Public policy is a major determinant of sports success. Several empirical studies have demonstrated that communist and former communist countries tend to be systematically more successful (Shughart II and Tollison, 1993 ; Hoffmann, Chew Ging and Ramasamy, 2002). As a rule, these studies focussed on how the communist regime affects the level of success. Positive effects have been found in the context of the Olympic Games as well as for specific sports.

METHODS

We analyse the success under communist regimes in the field of athletics. A country's number of entries in both the 1984 and the 2006 IAAF rankings (top 100) is taken as an indicator of its success. While also addressing the 'standard' question of whether and to what extent such regimes were more successful, we add two extensions to the literature.

First, building on Tcha and Pershin (2003) and Heyndels and Du Bois (2006) we analyse to what extent communist regimes show different patterns of specialisation. Success in sports depends on both nature and nurture. Still, it is crucial to see that the relative importance of the latter is much higher for the more technical disciplines in athletics: while it is possible to start at age 20 and become world champion in long distance running, to become a successful pole vaulter a much earlier start is required. As a result, systems of talent detection and development – in short: 'nurture' - play a much more important role in these technical events. Interfering with individual athletes' choices at young age may lead to later sporting success. A government that succeeds in such interference may be more successful. At the same time, it should be recognised that too much interference with private decisions may undermine the intrinsic motivation – in a sense: 'nature' - needed for elite sport performances.

A second extension of the literature lies in the recognition that "communist regimes" display significant differences. We try to empirically identify what characteristics of communism contribute most to sports successes. Thereto, a number of indicators developed in the politico-economical literature are introduced: the degree of democracy, the government's reaction to expressions of political discontent, ... measure different dimensions of communist interference with private decisions (Bruszt, Campos, Fidrmuc and Roland, 2007). To the extent that such interference with individual choice is also present in the field of sports, we expect that in less democratic countries governments are better able to 'channel' young athletes towards those sports where they can be most successful. At the same time, talent allocation towards sports that contribute to 'national prestige' may prevail (Gärtner, 1989). Here again, the possibility that lack of democracy may undermine athletes' motivation should be taken into account.

The empirical work compares determinants of athletic success and specialisation (the 'standard' explanatory variables such as population size, GDP, ... as well as our different indicators of 'types of communism') in 1984 and 2006. The idea is to assess whether the effect of communism (expected to be prominent in 1984) has disappeared or whether – almost 20 years after the fall of the Berlin wall – the sports structure and incentive schemes in communist countries is still apparent. The estimation technique – a Tobit II estimator - allows to disentangle two interrelated characteristics of a country's performance in sports: its level of success on the one hand and its degree of specialisation in specific sports on the other.

RESULTS

Preliminary results confirms that “politics matters”. (Former) communist countries are – even today – more successful. They have a significant revealed comparative advantage in non-running events where talent detection and youth development programs are crucial. They have a revealed disadvantage in sprinting.

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