

# BALANCE OF POWER: DEGENERATIVE POLITICS AND POLICY DESIGN IN SPORT

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## Abstract

The current complex political atmosphere in professional, international or American collegiate sports can be vastly improved through effective policy design and implementation. A theoretical analysis of Schneider and Ingram's research on social construction of target populations and subsequent degenerative politics provides a background for the assessment. Schneider and Ingram (1993) define degenerative politics as "characterized by its exploitation of derogatory social constructions, manipulations of symbols or logic, and deceptive communication that masks the true purpose of policy" (p.11). The context of degenerative policy involves "an institutional culture that legitimizes strategic manipulative and deceptive patterns of communication and uses of political power" (Schneider & Ingram 1997, p 102). They provide a tangible definition of degenerative politics which can be used to compare current practices in individual sports systems to fair systems. Our objective is to link current practices in sports systems to degenerative politics in an effort to demonstrate the current deficiencies that exist in sports system policy and governance.

The joy of competition becomes decreasingly less synonymous with sports each passing day. It has been overrun by the new philosophy that entertainment supersedes competitive balance. Bellamy (2006) concludes that sports defined by the majority of individuals today are something you watch, listen to, read about and talk about rather than something you do. This passive participation has solidified the evolution of sports from a leisure activity to a powerful industry. Sport as an industry is not devoid of the problems facing every other large enterprise, specifically the struggle for power and control of policy design and implementation.

The foundation of Schneider and Ingram's (1993)

contention is that social construction of target populations influence policy agenda and the rationales that legitimize policy choices. They place critical importance on the assessment of policy design construction based on motivation of power, control or influence over groups or individuals. Degenerative politics finds its roots in Social Conflict Theory, which states that social classes within society vary in wealth and resources and that groups with greater resources exert power over lesser groups through economic and brute force exploitation (Obershall, 1978).

Degenerative politics in sport contradicts its core principles of fair play, equity, and safety. Boxill (2003) expands on the explanation to include that accepted rules may be manipulated for a strategic advantage but are done so with the understanding that if overstepped the consequences will be swiftly enforced (p.351). Conversely, the use of fraudulent practices leads to a breakdown in sport systems often defined by both organizational and competition rules, leading to degenerative politics and potential corruption. These can be found in all levels of sport and case studies within each major level will be presented. A few examples of topics to be presented follow.

The best current case study example is the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and its process for selecting the World Cup host country. This process is conducted through secret ballot of its twenty-four member executive committee. It has been argued that a process conducted in this manner, devoid from personal justification or accountability for ones vote, allows for speculation of corruption. The surprising selection of Russia for 2018 and Qatar for 2022 most recently, brought tangible accusations of bribery. Additionally, public opposition by NGO's of the President leads to fears of financial backlash against a member country's governing body.

Another current example is the disproportional power structure among coupled organizations within a professional sports system, which jeopardizes its long term sustainability. Major League Baseball in the United States is a sports organization that allows its "teams" to generate and retain a large majority of their revenue locally. That coupled with the non-existence of spending controls provides a considerable advantage to teams that reside in a large market and negatively impacts competitive balance within the system. The sustained lack of competitive balance leads to fan disinterest in many markets. Fans as a target population have the ability to impact the overall success of the sports system. However, fans provide minimal power to influence policy design or implementation. Ross & Szymanski's (2008) theory of public choice states that policy within a sports system takes into account the best interest of the masses instead of individual fans (p.22). This powerless construction leads to a decrease in the ability of the fans to influence desired change. The NCAA and its Football Bowl Subdivision's BCS demonstrate the lack of power fans wield. The commissioners of the "big six" conferences have rebuffed fan outcry to alter the current end of season bowl games.

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