

Sport events as political capital: definitions, evaluation of effectiveness and who benefits

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It is hardly a new observation that sport has the potential to be used as a political tool. Indeed, Bose (2012) makes the claim that as sport has grown and become more commercialised, it has now become the most powerful political tool in the world. It is a grand claim and one which needs critical scrutiny, because the power of sport is often invoked as the key mechanism through which impacts and transformations can be levied on political processes and outcomes. Making sense of the claim can be confusing when attempting to disentangle the sometimes paradoxical rhetoric surrounding sport that comes from many actors, not least governing bodies and governments. Indeed, many international sport organisations regularly engage in the rhetorical promotion of how sport can transform societies and economies for good, yet at any hint of a sport event being used as a platform for political protest, the mantra that sport and politics should not mix is rolled out. The hypocrisy at governmental level would seem obvious; many democratic governments use sport events as a tool for mobilising political support, whilst authoritarian regimes may use sport events as a means for building political legitimacy.

In this paper, a model is designed based on a meta-analysis of literature, which better represents the theory of political capital and the role of sport in building this type of capital. The model explains how sport can be used to influence and transform politics; who is likely to gain and lose; and what factors influence its effectiveness in capital development. Whilst elements of these questions have been covered by other writers, there are some crucial gaps in the literature. For example, Grix (2013) has discussed how governments use sport as a form of soft power to help maintain rule. Whilst invaluable, it still only paints part of the picture. In particular, it does not fully address how other actors and agencies, such as sport bodies, pressure groups and businesses can also use sport and sport events as tools for bringing about political changes that benefit the groups they represent.

The model juxtaposes three important theoretical features: the notion of political capital; the concept of leverage; and the context of the potential impacts of sport on politics. In relation to capital, the work of Bourdieu (1986) informs and underpins our use and application of political capital, which in comparison with other 'capitals', such as economic, social and human, is an under-developed construct, rarely discussed in literature. However, it is a construct which has great value when exploring how and why sport can be used as tool which can impact on politics to facilitate positive or negative changes. This idea that sport has a value is, however, dependent on how it is used, or leveraged, in order to make an impact on politics. Leveraging draws mainly on the work of Chalip (2006), which looks at the intervening mechanisms which need to be utilised if sport is to

have any real impacts, along with how this has known and unknown knock on effects (Sam, 2009).

The model identifies the pathways, connections and processes that show how sport has the potential to be used by governments and a variety of actors to promote and protect particular political agendas and interests. One particularly important trend observed is the number of democratic countries which appear to be losing faith in sport events potential for developing political capital which they can lever for gain: this can be contrasted by the number of authoritarian regimes who seem to be attaching more faith in the role of sport and sport events to try and build their political power bases.

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