

**“Dropping the Ball”:**  
*The Understudied Nexus of Sports and Politics*

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*From the Roman Colosseum to Wimbledon Stadium, the Olympics to the Super Bowl, sports have always played a central role in societies. With so much at stake—money, pride, power (and occasionally even fun)—sports are undeniably political. Yet despite this recognition, political scientists and policy scholars devote little attention to the study of sports, especially compared to other disciplines like business, law, and economics. We offer reasons for this void and suggest how political scientists can begin to fill it. In our view, the nexus between sports and politics is not only a vital topic of study on its own, but it can also provide a lens through which to examine—and test—broader questions in the discipline. We propose how scholars can think more systematically about the interaction of politics and sports and leverage the distinctive qualities of sports to improve causal identification across a range of issue areas and subfields in political science and policy studies.*

**Keywords:** Sport and Politics, Sports and Policy, Political Science Research, Political Studies Subfields, Review Article, Sport and Media, Sport and International Affairs.

*Desde el Coliseo romano hasta el Estadio de Wimbledon, los Juegos Olímpicos y el Super Bowl, los deportes siempre han jugado un papel central en las sociedades. Con tanto en juego—dinero, el orgullo, el poder (y ocasionalmente incluso algo de diversión)—los deportes son innegablemente políticos. Sin embargo, a pesar de este reconocimiento, los científicos políticos y los académicos de política dedican poca atención al estudio de los deportes, especialmente en comparación con otras disciplinas como los negocios, el derecho y la economía. Ofrecemos razones para este vacío y sugerimos cómo los científicos políticos pueden comenzar a llenarlo. En*

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*nuestra opinión, el nexo entre el deporte y la política no es sólo un tema vital de estudio por sí solo, sino que también puede proporcionar una lente a través de la cual examinar y ensayar preguntas más amplias en la disciplina. Proponemos cómo los académicos pueden pensar de manera más sistemática sobre la interacción de la política y los deportes y aprovechar las cualidades distintivas del deporte para mejorar la identificación causal en una serie de áreas temáticas y subcampos de la ciencia política y el estudio de las políticas.*

**Palabras clave:** Deporte y Política, Deportes y Política Pública, Investigación en Ciencias Políticas, Subcampos de la Ciencia Política, Revisión de Literatura, Artículo de Revisión, Deporte y Medios de Comunicación, Deportes y Asuntos Internacionales.

## 体育、政治和政策：关于现有学术研究的批判性评价

不论是从罗马斗兽场到温布尔顿体育场，还是从奥运会到超级碗，体育一直都在社会中充当着中心角色。既然金钱、骄傲和权力（偶尔甚至还有娱乐）这些利害关系都与体育有关，后者一定是具有政治性的。然而，尽管这一点已被认可，政治科学家和政策学者却很少将注意力放在体育上，这与其对商业、法律和经济的关注相比尤为明显。本文解释了为何体育不受关注这一空缺，并暗示了政治科学家如何能开始填补此空缺。本文观点认为，体育和政治之间的联系并不仅仅是一个重要的研究话题，它还能提供工具用于检验和检查该学科范围内更广的问题。本文提议学者如何能更系统地考虑体育和政治之间的相互影响，同时充分利用体育的鲜明特性，以更好地识别政治科学和政治研究中一系列问题领域和分支领域之间的因果关系。

**关键词：**体育和政治，体育与政策，政治科学研究，政治研究分支领域，文献评论，评论文章，体育与媒体，体育与国际事务

Today more than ever, sports are in the zeitgeist. Millions of people watch and play sports. Sports are a sprawling industry globally, with fans and participants at every level: from youth teams, to amateur leagues, to university squads, to professional associations. Whether one lives in London or New Delhi, follows golf or cricket, loves LeBron James or Lionel Messi, it is hard not to be inundated by sports. In a world where 38.5 million people outside the United States watched the Super Bowl in 2015 (Price 2015) and the 2014 FIFA World Cup garnered 3.2 billion viewers (FIFA 2015), sports are every bit as globalized as food, culture, or finance.

Given the huge imprint of sports across the world, it should come as no surprise that sports are an intrinsically political business. In North America alone, revenues on professional sports were expected to exceed \$67 billion in 2016 (Berr 2016)—nearly ten times more than total campaign spending on all U.S. federal offices last year (PWC 2015). Lobbyists advocating greater access for women in sports, controversies over funding stadiums, corruption afflicting global sports federations, sports scandals rocking major universities, and countries competing for prime-time tournaments are but a few examples of how politics and sports interact.

For many societies, sports are the closest thing that exists to a civic religion. Today, sports venues reflect our political values, priorities, sensibilities, and even neuroses. In the shadows of their walls, we worship athletes like heroes from a Virgil epic, sing anthems that affirm our national supremacies, memorize player facts and statistics like our lives depend on it, and demand federal investigations when our sports idols disappoint us. All the while, the centrality of sports to our political cultures raises captivating questions about why this nexus exists and what its effects are on citizens and governments.

Yet, despite the pervasive role in world affairs that sports play in money, power, and public policy—both domestically and internationally—political scientists study the topic remarkably little. Not one of the discipline’s flagship outlets (*American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, or the *American Journal of Political Science*) has ever published a research article with the word “sports” in the title. To say that there is no veritable subfield covering sports in political science is an understatement. In those rare instances where political scientists and policy scholars do pay attention to sports, it is usually treated as a quaint diversion from serious scholarship.

This lack of attention to sports in political science is striking given that other disciplines have developed impressive research infrastructures devoted to sports. Several top-rated

universities have launched centers and institutes with sports themes. Moreover, economists like the University of Chicago's Steven Levitt have gained mass popularity for their studies on sports; statisticians such as David Spiegelhalter of the University of Cambridge have made headlines for applying analytics to predict sports matches; and legal experts like Harvard's Peter Carfagna run entire clinics dedicated to sports. In political science, however, sports are barely discussed.

This void is unfortunate. It is unfortunate in part because of the outsized impact that sports have on everyday life. Sports inspire zeal in fans, drum up kitchen-table conversations, and beget cultural icons. Famous sports events involving politics are embedded in our collective consciousness, as countless as they are unforgettable: from Jackie Robinson breaking the Major League Baseball color barrier against the backdrop of Jim Crow; to Nelson Mandela rooting for the South African rugby team in the 1995 World Cup; to former basketball star Dennis Rodman trying to repair Western-North Korean relations during a rendezvous with dictator Kim Jong Un.

Sometimes, politics implicates sports even to the point of discomfort. The 1972 Munich Massacre—in which the Palestinian terrorist group Black September assassinated eleven Israeli Olympians—proved that the injection of politics into sports can yield horrific (even deadly) consequences. More recently, in 2015, riots rocked Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, an African-American male who died tragically in police custody. In response to security concerns, the Orioles baseball team bolted its gates and played the Chicago White Sox with no fans, resulting in one of the most eerie backdrops to a sports event in recent memory.

Even Fidel Castro's death, one of the biggest political stories of 2016, contained an important sports element. Pundits had no dearth of stories by which to remember the former Cuban dictator, from the Bay of Pigs to the thawing of Washington-Havana hostilities. Yet news outlets from the *New York Times* to *ESPN* could not help but highlight his enduring legacy relative to

sports (Jeré 2016; ESPN 2016). Whether it was pitching a game for a Cuban revolutionary team, welcoming a Major League Baseball team to his country in the 1990s, or leveraging sports to craft nationalistic pride, Castro—for better or for worse—understood the power and politics of sports and its place in international affairs.

Sports and politics intersect visibly in society. Yet that is not the only reason why political scientists should study sports. Sports also provide a quintessential window through which to analyze many conventional topics in these disciplines. Issues like social capital, political empowerment, and corruption all emerge centrally in sports—and offer an ideal backdrop in which to probe these phenomena. Sports are flush with actors, institutions, and groups that mimic those found in familiar political spheres. Consequently, analyzing how these entities interact and respond to incentives can shed useful insight on politics writ large.

Apart from the substantive reasons for studying the politics of sports, there is also a compelling methodological one. Sports possess an inherently unpredictable quality, both on and off the field. Who wins and who loses, and how political interests benefit from sports by chance, present unique opportunities for applying causal identification strategies. Whether it is how an Olympic bid affects a country's foreign policy or how a Cinderella team shapes the electoral odds of a hometown politician, political scientists can exploit natural randomization to answer questions more convincingly than with standard observational techniques.

Put simply, the politics of sports is important, and there is every reason to think that taking a more systematic look at the topic can yield fruitful scholarship. This article reviews the existing literature on politics and sports, highlights what we perceive to be serious gaps in this research, and erects a framework for addressing some of the major issues that arise with respect to politics and sports. Our objective is not to identify the precise questions that political scientists should

answer, but to initiate a broad call for analyzing sports in greater depth. We argue that the subject is timely, interesting, and worthy of careful investigation.

Broadly speaking, we are agnostic about how political science research on sports should eventually evolve vis-à-vis the rest of the discipline. In the long term, sports could inspire its own thematic field of study, akin to environmental politics, health politics, or business politics. Another possibility is for studies on sports to simply get subsumed into the larger political science discipline, yet with a greater recognition of the value in such research. Given the existing state of the literature, it seems sufficient now to simply highlight the neglect of sports in political science and to create a springboard for future conversation on the topic.

A central objective of this study is to reveal the diverse, and often unexpected, ways that politics and sports interface: across disciplinary subfields, time periods, locations, and topics. Politics is everywhere in sports—in places both seen and unseen—and derives from the role of athletes, fans, teams, citizens, governments, markets, and institutions. Sports may affect political alliances, governmental decision-making, voting, interest group mobilization, and even social order and stability. They may shape individuals, families, societies, countries, and international bodies. Both domestically and globally, sports implicate the biggest debates in political science.

The remainder of our article unfolds as follows. First, we document the paucity of political science studies bearing on sports. Next, we propose why political scientists have traditionally been reluctant to study sports—and push back against these excuses. Subsequently, we discuss some big, current-events stories involving sports that we think should interest political scientists. We then explain the relevance of leveraging sports to understand broader questions about politics and world affairs. After that, we turn to how political scientists can use the distinctive qualities of

sports to improve causal identification. Finally, we conclude and suggest additional avenues for research.

### **“Sports and Politics Don’t Mix”—Or Do They?**

“Sports and politics don’t mix” (quoted in Schwartz n.d.). These words, famously uttered by former U.S. Olympian Eric Heiden in opposition to the United States boycotting the Moscow Games in 1980, ironically only serve to highlight how much sports and politics are intertwined. Sports and politics might not always mix well, as Heiden was perhaps trying to imply. But as the very action of the United States boycotting the Olympics—and Heiden’s quote itself—suggest, politics and sports certainly mix. Yet it is political scientists who seem to have taken Heiden’s admonition literally. The discipline, with few notable exceptions, has always kept sports at a generous arm’s length.

This separation should strike us as peculiar. Ancient Greek and Roman thinkers routinely discussed sports in the context of politics. According to Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist George F. Will (1990, 2), for instance, “Greek philosophers considered sport a religious and civic—in a word, moral—undertaking. Sport, they said, is morally serious because mankind’s noblest aim is the loving contemplation of worthy things.” Among classic Western civilizations, such ideals intersected iconically in the Roman Colosseum, where gladiatorial bouts inspired harrowing spectacles of Herculean strength. “The Colosseum was very much more than a sports venue,” says one study. “It was a political theatre” (Brichford 1999, 303).

Throughout generations, the link between sports and politics has been a constant and prevailing theme. Dating back to the Middle Ages, for example, “sports had a military character as the political formation of nation-states conferred valor and great prestige” (Brichford 1999, 303). Similarly, during the Renaissance, “authors used sporting imagery, metaphor, and allegory

to defend or critique the social order that sport was originally believed to uphold” (Colón Semenza 2003, 26). In colonial America, “ideas about tempering sport and leisure pursuits revealed the serious nature of the impending political, social, economic, and military challenges in the young nation” (Gems, Borish, and Pfister 2008, 49).

In contemporary society, it is no coincidence that public figures—and especially politicians—frequently invoke sports as a metaphor for politics. Former-U.S. President Barack Obama, for example, lamented that “when you’re in Washington, folks respond to every issue, every decision, every debate, no matter how important it is, with the same question: What does this mean for the next election?...They’re obsessed with the sport of politics” (Obama quoted in in Wolffe 2010, 137). Late American President John F. Kennedy declared that “[p]olitics is like football. If you see daylight, go through the hole” (quoted in Dent 2009, 43) Most succinct was Welsh politician Aneurin Bevan: “Politics is a blood sport” (Bevan quoted in Jarski 2005, 262).

In many countries, sports occupy a special status in society. “By becoming fans, spectators engage in certain kinds of pleasures, fulfilling their own desires through fetishism, voyeurism, and narcissism” (Brummett 2009, 21) writes one expert. Not coincidentally, teams often enjoy sizable tax breaks, reap big profits, and make out handsomely from public subsidies that finance their glittering new stadiums and other pet projects. In the United States, for example, sports are even exempt from certain anti-trust laws. As journalist Sally Jenkins (2011) explains, “[T]o quote *The Godfather*, Part 2, ‘It’s the business we chose.’ It’s a decision we’ve made as a culture and as a country and as a government.”

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that politics and sports are inextricably linked comes from politicians who explicitly try to capitalize on sports to improve their own election odds. For instance, in 2016, then-Republican presidential hopeful Carly Fiorina, embroiled in the Iowa

Caucuses, committed the ultimate act of apostasy by declaring her support for the Iowa Hawkeyes football team over her own alma mater, Stanford, in the Rose Bowl.<sup>2</sup> The attempt, which reeked of pandering (and ultimately backfired), led Fiorina to be justly lambasted for opportunism. Yet for all the backlash she received, Fiorina was right about one thing: Sports matter in politics.

Political science literature, however, focuses remarkably little on sports. Today, political investigations into sports are largely the domain of the press and popular media. Local and national newspapers are rife with articles recounting the latest stories involving politics and sports. Sports-specific outlets like *Sky Sports* or *Sports Illustrated*, as well as blogs such as *SB Nation*, also write about the politics of sports. These sources provide fast-response analysis of the day's top news. Yet they obviously differ from systematic research in which scholars derive concrete inferences about major political trends involving sports.

Many academic studies on sports politics more neatly qualify as historical accounts. For example, Zirin (2013) chronicles how sports shape political conflicts, looking especially at the role of dissenter athletes and how sports can inspire a more inclusive society. Additionally, Gorn and Goldstein (2013) offer an expansive history of how sports have mirrored American values since independence. Lowe (1995) outlines the role of the U.S. Congress in sports concurrent with their rise in American life. Senn (1999) takes a more international tack, focusing on the modern Olympics. Other studies analyze sports history through the lens of women (O'Reilly 2007), African Americans (Rhoden 2007; Wiggins and Miller 2003), or the disabled (DePauw and Gavron 2005).

A separate strand of literature on sports politics fits more comfortably in sociology. Gruneau and Whitson (1994), for instance, consider the role of hockey in Canadian life.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Twitter feed at <https://twitter.com/carlyfiorina/status/682999832189911040>

Hargreaves (2001) pinpoints intersections of sports with class, culture, disability status, race, religion, and sexual orientation. Festle (1996) concentrates on how women balance their dual identities as athletes and females. Hoberman (1984), meanwhile, examines ideological attributes of sports and the affinity of the political right for athleticism. In another study, Watterson (2009) explores how Americans draw equivalencies between sports, manliness, and the competence of political leaders. Mitchell, Somerville, and Hargie (2016) analyze the impact of socio-political divides on sports.

Conventional political science research on sports is limited—and focuses largely on governing institutions and global competitions. For instance, Markovits and Rensmann (2013) inspect how sports permeate local, regional, and global culture while influencing international politics. Some years earlier, Allison (2005) probed topics such as global sports bodies, the commercialization of sports, and their social value. Foer (2010), by comparison, considers how global soccer reflects sectarian conflicts, corporate power, and nationalism. Levermore and Budd (2003) investigate how sports influence political economy, nation building, and diplomacy. Other scholarship explores sports governance through a single-country context (see e.g., Houlihan 2009; deMause and Cagan 2008).

Overall, despite its depth and breadth, the literature on sports and politics is largely historical and sociological, with little quantitative analysis. It does not significantly examine the overlaps of sports and electoral politics, the policy-making process, or a battery of other factors that figure centrally in political science more broadly. Moreover, orthodox political science studies are largely limited to those institutions that govern and reflect domestic and international sports competitions, whereas research on sports and its prominent actors in relation to other political domains remains limited.

To the extent such concerns have been raised previously, most come from scholars outside political science departments.<sup>3</sup> For example, Jonathan Grix (2016, 42) of Birmingham’s School of Sport, Exercise, and Rehabilitation Sciences points to “the lack of academic research...by the very people one would assume would be at the forefront of sports politics analyses: political scientists and IR scholars.” Alan Bairner (2006, 1046) of Loughborough’s School of Sport, Exercise, and Health Sciences laments that, “not all political theorists or political scientists are ignorant about sport. Indeed for many it is an important aspect of their lives—but often only of their lives as lived away from the lecture theatre, the seminar room, and the computer screen.”<sup>4</sup>

A particularly revealing recent anecdote of how rarely political scientists study sports comes from the University of Chicago’s Institute of Politics, which hosted a seminar series in 2016 entitled *The Power and Politics of Sports*. Organizers convened leading writers, athletes, practitioners, and academics to discuss how sports and politics intersect in society. Session titles included “The Power of the Athlete,” “Fantasy Football Feud,” “Life as a Sports Reporter,” and “Concussion Crisis.”<sup>5</sup> Yet the sessions were notable for who was missing: in talks designed explicitly to highlight intriguing overlaps between sports and politics, no political scientists were listed as speakers.

In other social science disciplines, sports are much less marginalized. In law and business, for example, vibrant research agendas exist that not only take sports seriously, but also identify distinctive attributes of the topic that make it worthy of study. Many universities have launched

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<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is the University of Wisconsin’s Michael Schatzberg, who observes that “political scientists have, for the most part, not envisaged the world of sports as falling within either the political sphere or their professional purview.” For the source of this quotation and more, see <http://dept.polisci.wisc.edu/syllabi/1074/401.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See also Bairner (2010) for one of the few comprehensive analytical treatments of sports and politics.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://politics.uchicago.edu/pages/juliet-macur-seminar-series>

institutes, journals, and events dedicated to sports in these disciplines. Cases in point include: Marquette's National Sports Law Institute,<sup>6</sup> Harvard Law School's *Journal of Sports & Entertainment Law*,<sup>7</sup> the London Business School's annual "Sports Business Conference,"<sup>8</sup> and the University of Southern California's Sports Business Institute.<sup>9</sup>

In economics, scholarship on sports is arguably even more well established. Many top schools—including Vanderbilt,<sup>10</sup> Georgetown,<sup>11</sup> and the University of Chicago<sup>12</sup>—offer classes on the economics of sports. The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis has released materials for how to teach the economics of sports.<sup>13</sup> Leading economists such as Duke's Charles Clotfelter (2011) and Smith College's Andrew S. Zimbalist (2004) are renowned for their scholarship on sports, and popular books such as *Moneyball* (Lewis 2004) have spawned a virtual cottage industry on the economics of building winning sports franchises.

By comparison, political science research on sports teeters between the hyper-niche and the nonexistent. To our knowledge, only one scholarly journal—the *International Journal of Sports Policy and Politics*—is specifically devoted to the study of sports, politics, and policy. Yet its scope is limited. Many of the journal's articles come from scholars outside political science. Furthermore, as evidenced by recent article titles such as "Do Light Sport Facilities Foster Sports

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.law.marquette.edu/national-sports-law-institute/welcome>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://harvardjsel.com/>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://sportsbusinessconferencelbs.com/>

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.marshall.usc.edu/faculty/centers/sbi>

<sup>10</sup> See <http://my.vanderbilt.edu/vrooman/files/2016/06/ECON-2180-F16A.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> See <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/galei/Econ%20411%20provisional%20syllabus%20Spring%2013.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See <http://home.uchicago.edu/~arsx/syllabus/Econ%20281%20Syllabus%20Spr%202011.doc>

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.stlouisfed.org/events/2016/07/ee-lvl-econsports>

Participation? A Case Study on the Use of Bark Running Tracks” (Borgers *et al.* 2016) it is also reasonable to ask how much the journal emphasizes the “politics” in its name.

### **Why Are Sports Understudied in Political Science?**

Regrettably, sports command little attention in political science. Why the void? One big reason, we believe, is the perceived “unseriousness” of the topic relative to issues such as war, voting, regime change, and so forth that typically rank at the top of the discipline’s research agenda. Observers deem sports a form of entertainment that falls outside the bounds of what political scientists analyze. On its face, it is hard to blame a discipline preoccupied with the “big” questions—for example, “waves” of democratization or the roots of international conflict—for not caring about last night’s game.

A problem with this logic, however, is that politics implicate sports on many fronts. Not all aspects of sports seriously affect our daily lives, but many undoubtedly can. Moreover, economists, sociologists, legal scholars, and other social scientists also study weighty topics. Yet many nonetheless devote significant time to sports. Finally, it is by no means a criticism of political science to say that not all studies in the field grapple with momentous, life-or-death issues. This casts doubt on the idea that sports are too unserious to merit significant attention from the field.

To our minds, another reason for the dearth of political science research on sports is a lack of good data. To the extent that data availability dictates what political scientists can investigate, sports get short shrift. Major surveys both in the United States and globally—such as the American National Election Survey (ANES) or the World Values Survey (WVS)—do not include significant questions pertaining to sports. Compared, for instance, to policies such as social insurance, environmental protection, or taxation, this makes it difficult to analyze political attitudes toward sports. This justification is also tenuous. Many news outlets conduct scientific surveys on political

controversies in sports. Political scientists may also view the lack of data on sports as an opportunity. In fields like psychology, scholars exploit quasi-experiments and randomized controlled trials to study topics ranging from the anxiolytic influence of exercise to the impact of injuries sustained by elite athletes on depression, anxiety, and self-esteem (Leddy, Lambert, and Ogles 1994; Strickland and Smith 2014). With the rise of analytics in many sports, interest—and capacity—for carrying out data collection is likely higher than ever before.

In our view, an additional cause of the understudy of sports in political science is the perception of an Americanist bias. Notwithstanding major global events like the World Cup and Olympics, the American sports market is so big (and flush with money) that it rightly elicits the lion's share of attention in the United States, where many leading political science departments are based. With U.S. sports dominating the news, one could forgive political scientists for not realizing how much sports implicate other subfields, including comparative politics, international relations, methods, and even theory.

Yet move beyond American headlines, and it quickly becomes clear that the politics of sports spans the globe. Indeed, it may well be universal. Going forward, the perception of sports politics as an Americanist pursuit should also dissipate as other regions develop robust sports infrastructures. Latin America, for example, now has increasingly outstanding baseball leagues of its own. Basketball has grown exponentially in China and Japan, with inroads even being made in Sub-Saharan Africa. Similar expansions are underway in other sports, fueled by burgeoning middle classes in the BRICS and elsewhere.

Another reason why we sense that political scientists do not concentrate on sports is because they are fraught with supposedly irrational behavior. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people often instinctively root for their hometown teams or support teams simply because their

parents like them. The pull of family and hometown connections is indeed strong. In an era of professional free agency, some observers even liken rooting for a team to rooting for a jersey. As comedian Jerry Seinfeld quipped, “You’re actually rooting for the clothes when you get right down to it” (Seinfeld quoted in Hahmann 2010). With so much irrationality in sports, making sense of the frenzy might seem like an exercise in futility.

A flaw in this reasoning, however, is that one of the largest topics of study in political science—partisan identification—is a function of the same factors predicting sports fandom. Parents are a prime determinant of whether one leans conservative or liberal, and the “red-blue” electoral map indicates that partisan preferences are tied to geography. Yet this does not stop political scientists from studying party ID. Moreover, rationalism is hardly a prerequisite for investigating a topic, as evidenced by generations of political scientists who have examined topics like nationalism.

A final reason, to our minds, why political scientists largely ignore sports is because the subject matter is thematic. It is characterized by the topic under investigation instead of a unified set of questions or insights. Thematic fields are useful, however, because specific issue areas may possess their own distinctive qualities. One could argue, for example, that environmental, health, or business politics are just “special cases” of the politics of public policy. Yet this would ignore all the ways in which these policy areas implicate unique issues, actors, and problems.

Thematic areas are also valuable if one simply believes that certain issues “matter.” Environmental politics, for example, wrestles with existential threats like climate change. Healthcare politics grapples with a fundamental tenet of human well being. Business politics deals with the underpinnings of national and international economies. Sports, likewise, are foundational for many societies. “Sport,” as a Secretary-General of the United Nations once declared, “is a

universal language” (United Nations 2004). Because of its centrality, it is hard to argue that sports are undeserving of scholarly attention.

In short, none of the above justifications for why political scientists rarely study sports seems especially compelling. So it can be done, but how? To our minds, invigorating the study of politics and sports first requires identifying the kinds of questions the field should address. Here, we see two promising approaches. One is to ascertain some of the most relevant questions in sports today and to carve out a sports-specific research agenda. The other is to apply a sports frame to broader questions in political science that scholars are already trying to answer. In the following sections, we take each in turn.

### **Timely Questions in Sports Politics**

Below, we highlight several timely topics in sports that we believe could serve as the basis of systematic studies in political science. These “ripped-from-the-headlines” issues are intended to show how the discipline can engage an array of questions that are relevant, that involve topics the public cares about, and that can help deepen our understanding of politics.

#### ***“So, how much is enough?”: Sports Salaries and the “1 Percent”***

Today, much of the world is disillusioned over large—and growing—wealth gaps. As the perceived slights of the middle class have given rise to class warfare, a bevy of populist politicians, particularly in North American and Western Europe, have exploited this angst to champion “soak-the-rich” mandates and to enact broader regulations of business and the financial industry. Fat paychecks, “golden parachutes,” and the perceived indifference of Wall Street to the plight of Main Street have fueled consternation over how economic resources are divvied up in free-enterprise systems.

At the same time, many sports fans harbor little resentment toward athletes who make more in a season than they do in a lifetime. Babe Ruth, in his most profitable year, would have “only” made \$1.4 million in inflation-adjusted dollars (Calcaterra 2013). At the time of writing, the highest-paid athlete in the world, Real Madrid’s Cristiano Ronaldo, earns \$88 million a year, including salary and endorsements (Forbes 2016). Baltimore Orioles manager Buck Showalter said that he once asked his slugger Chris Davis, “[W]hen you walk into a Target store, can you buy anything you want. [sic] So, how much is enough?” (Brown 2016).

Why fans overlook perceived greed among athletes, but not CEOs and hedge fund managers, is unclear. One answer is that fans see athletic achievements more as a function of earned success. Yet “rags-to-riches” stories are not always the case in sports. Many successful athletes are themselves the children of athletes, and parental wealth today buys access to sports camps, personal trainers, psychologists, and a wealth of other resources that bode well for athletic prowess. Why do fans support players who hold out for hefty paychecks, yet resent the rest of the “1 percent”? This, and related, questions seem as pertinent to political science scholarship as they are to sociology, psychology, or behavioral economics.

### ***“I wouldn’t lock a person up for doing it”*: Teams and Freedom of Speech**

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s fall 2016 protests prior to NFL games have inspired virulent debate about the relationship between freedom of speech, team values, and public displays of patriotism. Ironically, Kaepernick’s motive for protesting—the maltreatment of African Americans, especially by law enforcement—has been muddled, with the broader controversy riveted on his method: sitting or kneeling during the National Anthem. Both Kaepernick’s defenders and critics have, in part, framed the debate in Constitutional terms.

Kaepernick's defenders—backed by U.S. Supreme Court decisions including the 1943 case that allowed Jehovah's Witnesses to sit during the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools and the 1990 case that struck down a federal law banning American flag burning—argue that his speech is protected. Kaepernick's detractors, meanwhile, maintain that the 1st Amendment actually entitles his employers to penalize him. According to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "I think [Kaepernick's protest is] a terrible thing to do, but I wouldn't lock a person up for doing it" (Liptak 2016).

Just as relevant as the civil liberties questions raised by athlete protests is how interested parties react. For example, former Baltimore Ravens coach Brian Billick has accused Kaepernick of not "liv[ing] up to his responsibility as a team member" (*CBS Sports Radio* 2016). But it is the San Francisco 49ers that have found themselves in the thorniest position: needing to acknowledge legitimate criticism of Kaepernick, without alienating his fans. What political incentives shape how players, coaches, and organizations strike the balance between preserving team values and respecting free speech?

### ***"Not a dime back": Sports in an Era of Austerity***

Public spending on sports has attracted heightened scrutiny amid recent global economic downturns. In 2009, a journalist criticized Jim Calhoun, then-coach of the University of Connecticut men's basketball team, for being the state's highest-paid public employee. "Not a dime back," was Calhoun's rejoinder (Associated Press 2009). To critics, public expenditures on sports symbolize waste and misplaced priorities—now more than ever with debt crises raging in Greece, Ireland, and Portugal and now-empty Olympic stadiums in many nations standing as painful reminders of unfulfilled government promises.

Deficit spending has its Keynesian defenders, who emphasize the specter of hysteresis, or the long-run damage done by contractionary policy, especially during recessions. Still, the merits of public sports outlays in stimulating economies has come into question after a flurry of spending in the 1990s, with one recent study finding that public investments in sports—such as subsidies for franchises—does little to boost economic growth (Baade and Matheson 2011). In many contexts, state spending on sports—including youth programs—has secured a central place on fiscal chopping blocks.

The effect of spending on sports, of course, cannot be distilled to simple economics. In communities across the world, cuts to athletic programs inspire deep anxiety and frustration while posing salient political questions about local identity. Furthermore, even after a global economic crisis, spending slashes have not been uniform. For example, despite its own flirtations with austerity, the United Kingdom experienced a 29 percent surge of nationwide investment in sports by the government in 2015 (Roan 2015). Under what conditions do voters support (or oppose) tax dollars being devoted to sports?

### ***“NEVER—you can use caps”*: Cultural Appropriation in Sports**

In the United States, debates about cultural appropriation have proliferated both on and off the field. In 2015, a Yale faculty member criticized a university email encouraging students not to wear “culturally unaware and insensitive” Halloween costumes as an affront to free expression (Stack 2015). While the email met broad condemnation, the response inspired backlash of its own. Concurrent with the protests, black football players at the University of Missouri threatened to boycott games if the university’s president did not resign following alleged inaction after a string of racially charged incidents.

Controversies over cultural appropriation have become ubiquitous in sports. Critics, for example, denounce the Washington Redskins for their name and merchandise, which they say infantilizes and disrespects American Indians. Other teams—such as the Kansas City Chiefs, Chicago Blackhawks, Atlanta Braves, and Cleveland Indians—are also excoriated for their names, caricatured mascots, and choreographed fan celebrations. The offense taken has even garnered the attention of the U.S. Congress. In 2014, 50 Senators signed a letter to the Redskins, urging the team to change its name (Brady 2014).

For his part, Redskins owner Daniel Snyder views the term as one of “honor and respect” and has pledged to “never change the name. It’s that simple. NEVER—you can use caps” (Brady 2013). The NCAA banned American Indian mascots in 2005 (it allows some schools to keep using mascot names that maintain ties with the tribes they represent, such as the Florida State Seminoles). Yet the inflexibility of pro sports teams may be entrenched by the rise of “anti-politically-correct” rhetoric. Why do some teams double down on their culturally contentious names, while others bow to pressure?

***“We’re blessed to get a free education”*: Amateurism and the (Semi-Pro?) Student-Athlete**

Particularly in the “mega-money” sports of American football and basketball, scandals around college players receiving illicit kickbacks—from University of Southern California standout Reggie Bush to the ouster of Ohio State football coach Jim Tressel—have sparked political controversy. While sought-after coaches such as Michigan Football’s Jim Harbaugh and Duke Basketball’s Mike Krzyzewski make annual salaries of \$9m and \$7m, respectively,<sup>14</sup> NCAA

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://sports.usatoday.com/ncaa/salaries/> and <http://sports.usatoday.com/ncaa/salaries/mens-basketball/coach/>

athletes cannot earn money selling memorabilia and do not receive royalties from video-game companies that use their likenesses.

Prescriptions range from a stipend-system to an open-bidding process modeled after free agency, but most include payment for athletes—which was similarly sought by football players at Northwestern University who tried (and failed) to unionize. Still, compensation has met criticism by those who say it would eliminate “amateurism”; those who say it would be logistically impossible outside certain sports; and those, including former Florida State Heisman Trophy Winner Jameis Winston, who say, “We’re blessed to get a free education.... And that’s enough for me” (Sherman 2014).

This claim rests, of course, on the dubious assumption that most Division I athletes receive an adequate education. For example, the University of North Carolina’s recent basketball titles have been marred by revelations of academic fraud—a hardly surprising event when many athletes see their time in college as a necessary, but disagreeable, middle-step to pro stardom. These sagas raise questions about the politics of attaching de facto semi-pro sports teams to campuses. What initially led to this curious symbiosis, and what political variables will ultimately sustain (or unravel) it?

### **Sports as a Window into Broader Questions in Politics**

Probing the nexus of politics and sports is worthwhile in and of itself. Yet it is also useful for another reason: to gain insights into broader topics in the discipline. Below, we look at several of the most prominent subjects in political science that connect closely to sports. These topics are at the heart of extensive attention in the discipline, and—collectively—span a range of subfields. We spotlight them to illustrate how political scientists can analyze classic questions of interest within the context of sports.

## Social Capital

Since Robert Putnam's (2000) landmark book *Bowling Alone* triggered an avalanche of studies on the topic, political scientists have debated both the origins and consequences of social capital (Baron, Field, and Schuller 2000; Dasgupta and Serageldin 2001; Lin 2002). Even in ultra-polarized electorates, sports often display an uncanny ability to unite people together. As *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne has remarked, “[s]ports, like so many other voluntary activities, creates connections across political lines. All Americans who are rooting for the Red Sox in the playoffs are my friends this month, no matter what their ideology” (quoted in Ulaby 2009).

As with partisanship, sports can also connect citizens of disparate economic backgrounds, occupations, races, and religions. Because fan bases cluster geographically, sports may promote goodwill within communities, not unlike schools, churches, and volunteer clubs. As Tony Pulis, head coach of West Bromwich Albion (an English football team) has noted, “[A] football club is part of the community.....I think the bond between the football team and the community is everything....We win together, we lose together, and...there's no other way of doing it.”<sup>15</sup>

This flipside, of course, is that sports can also divide opposing fans by perpetuating “in-group” / “out-group” distinctions (Greene 2013; Haidt 2012). These differences reflect both the positives and negatives of social capital. “Bridging” social capital confers advantages when trust and reciprocity orient people *across* groups toward a common goal. “Bonding” social capital, however, can yield disadvantages when these factors are confined exclusively to members *within*

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<sup>15</sup> From the transcription of “Part One | Tony Pulis’ first interview as Head Coach of West Bromwich Albion.” Accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyHT7FrK\\_V8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyHT7FrK_V8)

groups (Levitte 2004; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). When do sports unite people versus tear them apart? What lessons does this portend for healing (or exacerbating) larger political divisions?

### **Political Empowerment**

Just as Karl Marx called religion the “opiate of the masses,” some social theorists refer to sports in the same way (Bain-Selbo 2008). Sports consume energy, leaving people with less time and inclination to scrutinize politicians. A less charitable interpretation is that rulers deliberately harness sports to manipulate the masses. MIT’s Noam Chomsky, for example, insists that sports foster “jingoist and chauvinist attitudes” (quoted in Chomsky and Barsamian 1994, 269). In this vein, critics of American sports culture often argue that sports events constitute propaganda machines through the promotion of “hyper-nationalistic” displays (Doolittle 2013; Barron-Lopez and Waldron 2015).

According to some experts, this culture can draw people toward unthinking nationalism, instilling a shared belief of their society’s superiority. As one scholar writes, “[w]hen ardent nationalists convince themselves that a highly arbitrary conglomeration of tens of millions of human beings is somehow biologically or socially ‘real’ and deeply consequential enough to give up their lives and shed the blood of those associated with other nations—you can bet that something deep in the human psyche is being touched. Sports fans may simply be the comic sidekicks of nationalists” (Barash 2009).

Such issues speak crucially to the political empowerment (or lack thereof) of the masses. An extensive literature in comparative politics examines how regimes take advantage of their citizenries to retain power. Some rely on physical oppression (Davenport 2007; Pierskalla 2010), whereas others engage in clientelism, vote-buying, or propaganda (Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2004; Kitschelt 2000). Whether and how politicians exploit sports to bolster their power is unclear.

To the extent that governments wield sports to drum up nationalism or to reinforce their influence, how do citizens respond? When are leaders successful in their ambitions?

### **Corruption**

Few areas of society are immune to corruption (Rose-Ackerman 1999), and sports are no exception. Pete Rose, for example, earned a lifetime ban from Major League Baseball after betting on games in the 1980s. During the 2000s and 2010s, doping allegations disgraced numerous top cyclists, including seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong. The 2015 World Cup scandal—punctuated by the indictment of several top FIFA officials—was a global embarrassment. As a recent *New York Times* editorial declared, “Revelations of corruption in international sports have become dismally common” (New York Times 2016).

Corruption manifests in countless ways across sports. Some examples involve athletes striving for a performance edge, whereas others involve office-holders using their influence for self-aggrandizement. Some implicate “lone wolf” actors, whereas others comprise vast networks of criminality. Like in other political domains, obtaining good data on corruption in sports is difficult precisely because so many activities go undetected. Yet prominent transgressions that have been uncovered suggest that sports are a ripe setting in which to explore corruption’s causes and consequences.

A crucial area of research on this front is how social norms affect whether corruption occurs, and if so, how authorities confront it. In a transnational context, some scholarship asserts that people who work in multilateral institutions absorb the norms of these places (Lewis 2005). In the same way, global sports bodies like the International Olympic Committee may transmit their own norms surrounding corruption in terms of rule making and enforcement. When does

corruption thrive in sports? What safeguards exist against graft, and do they mirror those found outside of sports?

### **Regime Transitions**

From post-colonial India to the Cold War, “nation-building” in Iraq to the Arab Spring, democratization has long been one of the most salient—and hotly contested—topics in international politics (Geddes 1999). Factors thought to shape regime change include (among others) economic development, colonial heritage, demography, inequality, natural resource endowments, supranational institutions, and even the backgrounds of leaders. Compared to these variables, the idea of sports fostering regime transitions might seem far-fetched. But this does not appear to be the case.

Hosting global sports events may be one mechanism for regime change. On one hand, autocrats can use these events to line their pockets and to fortify their reputations. On the other hand, the global spotlight shone on nondemocracies may delegitimize tyrants and limit their ability to repress. Some experts, for instance, contend that the 1988 Seoul Olympics destabilized Chun Doo Hwan’s dictatorship by supplying political cover for pro-democracy reformers. Citizens protested without fear of reprisal, knowing that the state would not respond with the world watching (Johnson 2001).

Which sports people play may also shape regime types. For instance, “horizontal” sports like soccer—marked by egalitarian participation—may strengthen a nation’s “civic culture,” making democracy more likely (Christesen 2012). An analogy can be drawn to “horizontal” and “vertical” religions. Scholarship, for example, shows that Protestantism promotes democracy more than Catholicism because the former is more horizontal (i.e., democratic) in its decision making,

whereas the latter is more vertical (i.e., authoritarian) in its papal hierarchy (Woodberry and Shah 2004). When do sports reinforce democracy? When do they undermine it?

### **Social Movements**

Social movements are on the rise across much of the world. In the United States, for example, the Black Lives Matter, anti-Wall Street, and Tea Party protests rank among the nation's most important recent developments. Sports have a long history of contributing to such campaigns. For example, the so-called "Black Power Salute" by athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics remains one of the most emblematic images in sports history. More recently, basketball stars like LeBron James have been spotted with "I Can't Breathe" t-shirts, a symbol of solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

Against this backdrop, a major question is how athletes help to solve collective action problems within the context of social movements. Considerable research explores how some groups successfully organize and lobby for political change (see e.g., Olson 1965). One method is through the presence of "political entrepreneurs" who galvanize action among sympathizers (Kosack 2013; Noll 1989). Sports figures, by dint of their celebrity, may be uniquely positioned to fulfill this role. Athletes can leverage money, clout, and popularity to advocate for issues, regardless of whether they possess expertise on a topic.

At the same time, other athletes either refuse to talk politics or endure criticism for doing so. Basketball legend Michael Jordan, for instance, reputedly concealed his political views because "Republicans buy sneakers, too" (Vasilogambros 2016). Athletes who speak their minds often raise the ire of the political class and upset fans. As one commentator notes, "so many times, athletes...are told to 'stick to sports' or 'stay out of politics'" (McCalmont 2015). Why do some

athletes seek leadership roles in social movements while others do not? What does this mean for understanding the motivations of political entrepreneurs?

### **Global Governance**

Global governance—as exemplified by international institutions, treaties, pacts, and other agreements—is of mounting interest in political science (Finkelstein 1995; Hughes and Wilkinson 2002). Amid a rapidly globalizing world, multilateral organizations tackle critical challenges, spanning climate change to nuclear proliferation, terrorism to monetary policy. Yet as exemplified by Brexit and the recent retreat toward isolationist platforms by several U.S. presidential candidates, many nations are backpedaling from supranational commitments, desiring more autonomy in policy areas like immigration and trade.

In striving to ensure their legitimacy, multilateral organizations often face a battery of internal political dilemmas. These include procedural questions about who controls the policymaking process (e.g., setting the agenda and voting), mechanisms for resource allocations (e.g., collecting membership fees or subsidizing member states), and how to solve conflict between countries (e.g., mediating sovereignty disagreements or adjudicating allegations of unfair practices). All of these issues may influence the willingness of countries to join—and defer to—supranational institutions.

Like the United Nations or the European Union, many sports possess their own global or regional governing bodies. The International Tennis Federation (ITF), the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA), and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews (R&A) are but a few well-known examples. These organizations face many of the same political challenges as standard supranational institutions, making them prime laboratories for study. How

do global sports federations compare to traditional global governance institutions? Are they gaining or declining in prominence, and why?

### **Peace and Conflict**

Even amid factors such as ethnic hatred, natural resource conflict, and inequality, sports may still play a vital role in triggering (or quelling) violence. On one hand, anecdotes exist of sports provoking conflict. For instance, the “Football Wars” between Honduras and El Salvador began after qualifying matches for the 1969 World Cup brought inter-state tensions to a fever pitch (Dart and Bandini 2007). Additionally, in the 1990s, a soccer match between Serbia and Croatia was never played because of fighting that ensued between opposing fans. Today, it is still remembered as a harbinger of the Balkan Wars (Drezner 2006).

On the other hand, anecdotes exist of sports mitigating violence. After helping his country qualify for the World Cup in 2006, star striker Didier Drogba was widely credited for ending the five-year Ivorian Civil War in 2006 when he implored his nation to lay down its arms (Hayes 2007). On Christmas 1914, in the midst of World War I, British and German troops in Flanders halted fighting to play an impromptu soccer match (Kuper 2015). Furthermore, so that fans could watch Brazilian soccer legend Pele, opposing sides in Nigeria’s Biafran War reached a truce in a conflict that eventually raged from 1967 to 1970 (Greenwell 2012).

One question for political scientists is whether certain chains of events are examples of causation or correlation. Another question, as some anthropology work hypothesizes, is whether sports serve as an alternative outlet for bellicose tendencies or whether they actually whet the appetites of citizens for violence (Sipes 1973). For scholars of both intra- and inter-state conflict, how sports shape violence is unclear. What are the causal pathways through which sports can spark

or check political violence? Do certain sports have more conflict- or peace-inducing effects, and why?

### **Gender and Women's Issues**

With scholars paying increased attention to the benefits of diversity and inclusion in an array of environments, questions of women's rights have assumed a pivotal position in political science (Carroll 2003; Goren 2009; Krook and Childs 2010). Trends in feminism, how women perceive their roles in society, and how their preferences translate into social change have become significant debates in the field. Although many nations have made large strides in expanding opportunities for females, the "glass ceiling" still looms large in many contexts—even more so after Hillary Clinton's surprise loss in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

One area that reflects this mix of both progress and room for improvement is sports. In the United States, Title IX, signed into law by President Richard Nixon more than 40 years ago, has played a tremendous role in closing gender gaps in athletic participation. The statute originally constituted a broad mandate designed to erase discrimination based on sex: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Education Amendments of 1972).

Advocates of Title IX herald the surge in popularity among women's sports. Indeed, female participation in American collegiate athletics has risen more than twelvefold since 1972 (Greenwell 2012). Skeptics, however, point to unanticipated consequences—for example, the cutting of men's sports programs to achieve gender parity and the financial stresses placed on schools to support undersubscribed women's sports. What are the political consequences of equal-

opportunity laws, both in sports and other areas? What benefits (and unpredictabilities) do they present, and how do political interests respond?

### **Human Rights**

When the U.N. General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights nearly a half century ago, it was a watershed moment. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton (1998), for example, once called it “one of the most important documents of the 20th century, indeed of human history.” Yet even today, gross abuses of human rights—from human trafficking in India to the use of chemical weapons in Syria—remain far too common. In response, much ink has been spilled in political science trying to determine why some countries protect human rights more than others (Moravcsik 2000; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999).

Global sports bodies possess tremendous leverage to advance human rights. Major sporting events can be a huge boon for national economies, whereas boycotts by international federations can leave countries empty-handed. Unfortunately, even as many sports officials pay lip service to human rights, their actions can fall short. As journalist Ken Shulman (2013) pointed out, “[i]t’s really a checkered record. For every positive step that something like the International Olympic Committee and FIFA take, they do something really despicable and underhanded.”

For example, in a defiant stance against apartheid, the IOC banned South Africa from the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964. Yet 40 years later, it allowed Russia to host the Olympics, which according to Human Rights Watch (2013), engages in a litany of human rights violations, including “[f]orced evictions,” “[m]igrant worker abuses,” “[p]ress and civil society crackdown,” and “[a]nti-LGBT discrimination.” Why do global sports federations award major events to some human rights violators but not others? Are they purely profit-motivated, or are other calculations at play?

## **Public Policy Making**

Governments—at the local, provincial, and national levels—are often intimately involved in sports policy making. Most visibly, such policies involve major investments in sports stadiums and infrastructure. Yet state purview can also extend into other realms, such as regulation, taxation, court battles, television contracts, collective bargaining, and engaging in public-private partnerships with sports organizations. Not unlike other policy areas—such as education, the environment, or healthcare—politics plays a key role in who wins (and loses) from policies surrounding sports.

One approach to understanding policy formation in sports is to adapt the classic “iron triangle” model from American politics. Here, policy formulation is a function of executive bureaucracies, congressional committees, and interest groups, which collectively work to each other’s benefit (but not necessarily the general public’s) (Adams 1982; Briody 2004; Heclo 1977). Similarly, one could imagine an “iron sports triangle” comprised of prominent actors—namely, fans, owners, and politicians—who pursue their self-interests. Fans want winning teams, owners want profits, and politicians want re-election.

An alternative, perhaps more nuanced, strategy could be to model sports policy making through well-known “issue networks” comprised of multiple actors, including those discussed above, but also the media, business coalitions, consultants, and the like (Heclo 1978). Sports policy making is clearly “the product of many hands.” The challenge is to decipher how actors maneuver and how political structures filter their preferences. What mix of interests and institutions yields different policy outcomes in sports? When do these outcomes align with the public good versus that of special interests?

## **Causal Identification in Sports**

Asking the right questions is essential to energizing the study of sports politics. Yet equally crucial are research designs that advance causal identification. In recent decades, methodologists have underscored the importance of randomization as a fundamental tool for interpreting cause-and-effect relationships. Although some research critiques randomized studies on the grounds that they are not an empirical “gold standard” (Deaton 2010), their popularity is a testament to their benefits. Fortunately, in the case of sports, randomization is built into the very DNA of many questions of interest.

On the field, the adage that “games aren’t played on paper” suggests the difficulty of forecasting which teams will actually win. In most sports, it is not unheard of for underdogs to beat their heavyweight rivals, and rare is a season in which the last team standing is exactly the one that most analysts predicted. Off the field, many aspects of sports—such as which city will secure a new expansion team or which country will host the Olympics—are also not foregone conclusions. Because of their inherent unpredictability, sports present unique opportunities to gain empirical traction over political questions.

Other disciplines offer useful instruction on this count. When it comes to leveraging randomization on the field, for example, a recent economics study parsed the connection between a country’s wins in the World Cup and its success in international trade (Bayar and Schaur 2014). The premise was that countries with heightened global visibility trade more, and winning in the World Cup increases a nation’s profile. Because World Cup matches are not easily predicted—and outcomes should not be endogenous to trade—the games could be used to test whether countries with greater presence on the world stage indeed trade more.

It is not hard to think of expressly political dynamics that one could study using similar approaches. For example, a country’s record in earning gold medals at the Olympics could

exogenously improve its reputation, making it a better candidate for joining treaties or international organizations. If a public university's football team wins the Sugar Bowl, perhaps its state legislature rewards the school with more public dollars because it holds greater public credibility. Armed with a clean identification strategy, in which sports outcomes are plausibly exogenous, political scientists can examine countless topics.

There are many ways to get creative with this approach. Suppose, for example, one wants to see if sports affect partisan leanings. For example, one well-known journalist claimed that supporting a losing baseball team as a youth turned him conservative: "My friends, happily rooting for Stan Musial, Red Schoendienst and other Redbirds, grew up cheerfully convinced that the world is a benign place, so...they became liberals. Rooting for the Cubs in the late 1940s and early 1950s, I became gloomy, pessimistic, morose, dyspeptic and conservative. It helped...that the Cubs last won the World Series in 1908" (Associated Press 1998).

Self-selection could impair a simple test of whether fans of winning teams are more likely to be liberal. Supporting a losing team might turn one conservative, but conservatives might also be more likely to stick with losing teams. One solution is to exploit diachronic changes in team success: identify if fans of a team who grew up in a city before that team had success are more conservative than younger fans who grew up in the same city after that team had success. Ideally, success would be due to some random shock like a new owner. The virtue of this design is that it holds most contextual factors constant.

Using the on-the-field randomness of sports to explore political questions does have some precedent. One recent article, for example, investigated the link between winning college football teams and the outcomes of Senate, gubernatorial, and presidential elections over the period 1964-2008 (Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010). The authors discovered that—even if politicians had little

or nothing to do with sports outcomes—people still rewarded incumbents for victories by voting for them at higher rates. This raises questions about what priorities are most important to voters and the issues they consider at the ballot box.

Political scientists can also exploit randomness off the field to gain empirical leverage into questions of interest. Suppose one wants to know whether certain outside events, such as spikes in petroleum prices affecting oil-rich nations, make governments more aggressive (The Economist 2016). This is difficult to test because foreign policy actions may be endogenous. One way to tackle this problem, however, could be to analyze how countries behave when they are unexpectedly awarded a prize such as hosting the Olympics, which is frequently the result of a highly idiosyncratic selection process.

Anecdotal evidence indeed indicates that this may embolden countries to become more assertive in their foreign policies. For instance, as Russia hosted the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014, President Vladimir Putin proceeded to flex his nationalistic muscles. According to some reports, his actions in Crimea suggested a country looking to extend its hard power and to regain the former glory of the U.S.S.R. A large-N empirical strategy—analyzing both countries chosen to host major sports tournaments and those left out—could shed light on whether this is a common phenomenon.

Again, some precedent exists for using the randomness of sports off the field to test political theories. For example, a recent article hypothesized that an exogenous shock such as hosting the Olympics could help to overcome public policy stalemates. Using interpretive analysis, the study examined the case of the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics. It showed that the UK's Department for Culture Media and Sport and Visit Britain developed beneficial alliances so as to

demonstrate positive impacts on tourism deriving from the nearly £9.3 billion in state investments devoted to the games (Weed, Stephens, and Bull 2012).

Even if one is skeptical that country selection for global sports events is truly random, there may still be ways to improve causal identification. For instance, in the World Cup study mentioned earlier, the authors actually argue that whether a country is chosen to host a mega-sports event may be endogenous to trade (Bayer and Schaur 2014). The study, however, proposes a workaround. Capitalizing on FIFA's rotation policy of not hosting back-to-back World Cups on the same continent, the authors use how far geographically an exporter is from the previous World Cup's host as an instrumental variable to preempt selection challenges.

The empirical strategies discussed above are all quasi-experimental. Of course, political scientists can also devise their own randomized experiments bearing on sports. This can be particularly useful when "unobservables" would otherwise confound causation. Want to know if a candidate wearing a Blue Jays hat is more likely to get elected in Toronto? This can be simulated. Want to know if citizens view a prime minister who plays golf as out-of-touch and elitist? This can be tested. The array of questions that political scientists can pose with randomized experiments is seemingly infinite in sports.

In a recent book entitled *The Numbers Game: Why Everything You Know About Soccer is Wrong*, the author concludes that upwards of 50 percent of every soccer match is determined by randomness (Anderson 2013). Certainly, better and worse teams exist in any league, and the more games team play, the more talent prevails. Yet perhaps more than we recognize, sports outcomes are decidedly random, not just on the field, but off it, as well. To the extent that political scientists can capitalize on this fact, not only will studies of sports be more common, but their findings more convincing.

## Conclusion

In contemplating the clear bond between politics and sports, journalist David Zirin (2013, xii) arguably said it best:

The problem with...everyone who tries to segregate these two worlds [of politics and sports] is that they are trafficking in myth. They want us to believe that sports and politics together are as painful a mash-up as Mitt Romney getting cornrows or Hillary Clinton cutting a salsa album. It is certainly easy to understand why this is so readily accepted. Many of us watch ESPN to forget at all costs what they are doing on C-SPAN.

Sports are indeed an escape. They offer a welcome, if brief, respite from everyday life. Terrorist plots may be afloat, natural disasters may be brewing, and poverty may be ravaging whole nations. Yet even in these somber times, people still take comfort in sports. “Just play. Have fun. Enjoy the game,” implored Michael Jordan (quoted in Thomas 2016, 143). Yet if “sports is human life in microcosm,” as famed journalist Howard Cossell observed (quoted in Bloom 2010, 30), then sports are much more than an escape; they are part and parcel of who we are. Sports, deeply human as they are, cannot elude the unmistakable pull of politics.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that political science has neglected sports. Like a slowly meandering changeup in baseball, sports have barely registered on the discipline’s radar gun. Unlike other fields—economics, business, and the law—political scientists have not made sports a centerpiece of investigation. Whether because sports are considered too unserious, the lack of data on sports politics, the perceived Americanist bias of sports, or the notion that sports are impossible to study systematically, sports have been largely excluded from political science.

Sports, of course, are not the only form of entertainment that play a major role in our society, but which political scientists oddly neglect. Movies, television, music, art, and the like are all inherently political—and understudied. Consider Paul McCartney speaking out for environmentalism, Bono lecturing on debt relief in Africa, or George Clooney complaining about

the corrupting influence of money in politics. “Hollywood-types” supposedly pull the purse strings of presidential candidates, while multimedia conglomerates lobby aggressively for their own interests.

Sports, however, are often uniquely positioned to bring out the best and worst of our political tendencies. One need look no further than the 2016 Olympics in Rio to see why. There, on the world’s greatest sports stage, a judo athlete from Egypt refused to shake hands with his Israeli competitor, a disturbing reminder of the divisiveness plaguing the Middle East. Meanwhile, the first-ever Olympic “refugee team” constituted a hopeful symbol of global collaboration. It is hard to see how scholars could not be drawn to such topics that cut to our most primal political instincts.

Ultimately, no shortage of stories exist interlacing politics and sports. Making sense of these anecdotes—and deriving generalizable trends from them—should be a priority for political science. Vince Lombardi, the legendary Green Bay Packers football coach, insisted that “he never lost a game—it’s just that he sometimes ran out of time” (Kindall and Winkin 2000, 303). There is no game clock for tackling new and important topics in political science. Yet this does not mean that we should not keep score. Studying sports politics does not require a Hail Mary pass—just a good game plan, and a bit of effort.

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