The Shifting Attitudes of Citizens Toward Policymakers, Sports, and Democracy Following a No-Vote Subsidy

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The contribution of the professional sports stadium to its city has long been debated by team owners, elected officials, scholars, activists, fans, sportswriters, and ordinary citizens. This debate intensifies whenever the possibility of publicly funding a stadium’s construction or renovation is raised. Traditionally, the question of public investment in the US has been decided by voters via the tools of direct democracy, including the referendum and initiative. However, since 2005, 29 North American stadium projects have been allocated over $8.8 billion of public funds without any form of voter approval (Kellison, 2013; Long, 2013). The practice of allocating public funds toward a project without direct public consent is referred to as the no-vote subsidy. In the absence of ballot results or poll numbers, policymakers can presume the public’s will to reflect their own preferences. However, it may also be possible that the enacted policies do not correspond to the wishes of the electorate.

One of the most recent instances of the no-vote subsidy occurred in Columbus, Ohio, where county commissioners and city councilmembers approved the purchase of the city’s downtown arena using tax revenues generated from a local casino. Though the subsidy was made without a public vote, Columbus residents had already set a precedent by opposing five stadium-financing issues over 35 years.

In this study, the impact of this financing plan is examined from the perspective of the citizenry. There were two broad purposes of this study: (1) to identify the factors that contribute to citizens regarding a subsidy favorably or unfavorably; and (2) to examine the public response to the no-vote subsidy.

Two research questions were proposed to achieve these aims. First, the factors that influence a citizen’s attitude toward a stadium-financing plan approved without the public’s direct consent were sought. Although there is reason to suspect that citizens would oppose policymakers’ allocation of taxpayer dollars without a public vote, some factors may contribute to citizens regarding a subsidy favorably. Thus, the following research question was proposed:

RQ1: What factors influence a private citizen’s favorability or unfavorability toward a plan to finance a professional sport stadium using public funds allocated through a no-vote subsidy?

Citizens may support the public financing of a stadium if they perceive doing so will result in benefits to the community, including positive economic impact and civic pride (Horne, 2011; Winfree & Rosentraub, 2012). Additionally, citizens may simply trust policymakers’ motives; in this case, ordinary citizens may acknowledge their own lack of understanding and defer to elected officials with the expectation policymakers will act in ways that reflect the will of the people.

Despite the commonsense prediction that enacting policies contrary to her or his preferences will displease a voter, the target (or targets) and extent of this discontent is unclear. Citizens dissatisfied with public policy may express their dissatisfaction in a variety of ways (e.g., with antagonism, with apathy) and toward a number of individuals, groups, or institutions (e.g., civil servants, policy benefactors, the democratic process). To guide this line of inquiry, a second research question was proposed:

RQ2: What are the consequences and for whom are the consequences of a private citizen’s attitude toward a plan to finance a professional sport stadium using public funds allocated through a no-vote subsidy?

In response to the research questions, a theoretical model and research hypotheses attending specifically to the attitudes of the citizenry were proposed and subsequently tested empirically. To explore the relationships among the 10 variables and 11 hypotheses provided in the theoretical model, a nonexperimental survey research design was employed. A survey (Columbus Arena Survey 2012; CAS12) was developed to measure the attitudes of Columbus residents toward a number of individuals, groups, and institutions, including civil servants, policy benefactors, and the democratic process in general. A pilot survey of 158 central Ohio residents was used to examine the psychometric properties of the initial instrument. Upon item modification, insertion, and deletion, a 55-item survey
was finalized for the principal analysis. From a pool of over 625,000 registered voters in Franklin County, 5,000 individuals were randomly selected and received a survey packet. A total of 401 usable surveys were returned and included in the principal study analysis. The results of structural model testing provided support for six of 11 hypotheses. Two additional hypotheses received partial support, two were left unsupported, and one was not examined. Finally, the model fit indices suggested that the model fit the data satisfactorily ($\chi^2/df=995.79/513=1.94$; RMSEA=.05; SRMR=.08; CFI=.96; TLI=.95).

Both perceived arena impact and trust in civically paternalistic leadership were significant predictors of one’s attitude toward the public-financing plan. In turn, this attitude toward the financing deal impacted attitudes toward the arena’s primary tenant, policymakers associated with the plan, and the democratic process in general. The results of this study indicated that though ultimately immaterial in the public-financing decision, public perception of the deal was not inconsequential. In this particular case, it was also suggested that a slight majority of the public approved of the financing plan.

In addition to adding to what we know about the stadium-financing case in central Ohio, this study contained the first large-scale analysis of voter attitudes toward myriad individuals, groups, and institutions. In brief, the results suggested that ordinary citizens reflect upon both the perceived impact of the arena and the trustworthiness of their elected officials when considering the appropriateness of a stadium subsidy. Furthermore, whether a citizen approves or disapproves of a financing plan impacts her or his attitudes toward the team, policymakers, and the democratic process altogether. As much as a citizen might disapprove of the means or outcome of a no-vote subsidy, however, that disapproval has little impact on her or his political apathy or future voting intentions. Thus, even a citizen’s strong support for or disapproval of the no-vote subsidy does little to compel the individual to actually vote for or against the policymakers affiliated with the financing deal.

A number of talking points—expected and unexpected—emerged from the results presented in this study. During the presentation, I will use the results of the CAS12 study as a foundation of reflection on the research methods employed, civic paternalism and the no-vote subsidy, and the intersection of sport, public policy, and democracy. This discussion will include an analysis of the measurement model and identification of the study’s limitations. Additionally, the broader theoretical and practical implications of the findings will be discussed. Finally, an agenda for future research will be set.