Civic Pride or Civic Duty: An Examination of Willingness to Support a Professional Stadium Referendum

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Professional sport stadium subsidization is abundant across the United States. Stadium projects are often touted as economic drivers that have the ability to spark municipal growth (Duquette & Mason, 2008). According to media reports, recent stadium and arena development in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Detroit has sparked major economic development for their respective communities (Flores, 2017; Gallagher, 2016; Yotter, 2016). However, extant research has found professional sport stadiums bring little to no economic benefit to a municipality (see: Baade, 1994, 1996; Baade & Dye, 1988a, 1990; Baade, Baumann, & Matheson, 2008; Coates & Humphreys, 1999, 2002; Euchner, 1993; Zipp, 1996). Despite this research, key local stakeholders associated with the stadium projects often promote economic benefits as well as some of the noneconomic benefits like civic pride and increased quality of life to garner constituent support (Crompton, 1995; Danielson, 1997; Sanderson, 2000). Constituent support is especially crucial when the stadium project proposal requires approval from the local voters via referendum. Notably, most major league sport stadium referendums held since 1990 have passed (Kellison & Mondello, 2014; Mondello & Anderson, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand which factors may influence a constituent’s willingness to support a professional sport stadium project when faced with a referendum.

Economic benefits such as new jobs, improved municipal economy, additional tax revenue, and overall fiscal success for the city may be promoted to garner support from local citizens. Santo (2007) found local residents valued the economic benefits associated with a proposed Major League Baseball stadium project in Portland, Oregon.

Because economic benefits have been dispelled by many academic economic impact reports, sport economists have suggested promoting noneconomic benefits such as increased quality of life and civic pride (Baade & Dye, 1988a, 1990; Coates & Humphreys, 1999; Noll & Zimbalist, 1997; Sanderson, 2000; Zipp, 1996). Focusing on noneconomic benefits has proved successful in various professional sport stadium referendums across the United States including Cincinnati (Brown & Paul, 1999).

Additionally, voters may rely on the opinions and messages of local elites and stakeholders when considering local issues at the ballot box (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Carmines & Kuklinski, 1990; Fort, 1997; Lupia, 1994; Mondak, 1993). Specifically, politicians, the local media, stadium proponent groups, the local business community, and team owners can potentially influence the outcome of a stadium referendum (Friedman & Mason, 2004; 2005). These stakeholders have shown success in swaying voters in supporting a stadium referendum in Cincinnati and Denver (Brown & Paul, 1999; Sage, 1993).

Team identification may also influence a constituent’s support when faced with a referendum for a local professional stadium construction project (Depken, 2000). The residents who highly identify with the local team may consider its existence as a crucial part of their lives, and may provide unwavering support for the team. This connection can then influence how a resident supports a stadium referendum. Team interest was a critical element in the general public’s support for funding sports stadiums (Owen, 2006), supporting further exploration of this variable. As such, the current study examines team identification as a potential precursor to a respondent’s willingness to support a stadium project.

The current study examined how voter perceptions of the aforementioned factors (i.e., economic benefits, noneconomic benefits, stakeholder influence, team identification) may influence their willingness to support a stadium project via a referendum. This case study approach investigated the city of San Diego and the 2016 NFL
Chargers stadium proposal. Citizens of the city of San Diego were faced with a stadium proposal for the NFL Chargers in the November 2016 election to approve or reject a 4% hotel tax increase to subsidize $1.15 billion for the Chargers new stadium. Registered voters of San Diego were randomly surveyed via email prior to the referendum election with 182 participants completing the questionnaire. The researcher-developed questionnaire consisted of 48 questions addressing respondent’s perceptions of economic benefits, noneconomic benefits, stakeholder influence, and team identification when considering the stadium project. The questionnaire was pre-tested by utilizing a panel of experts, a field test, and a pilot test.

Structural equation modeling was utilized to examine the relationship between the exogenous variables (i.e., economic benefits, noneconomic benefits, stakeholder influence, and team identification) and the endogenous variable (stadium support). Team identification also was held as an antecedent to examine a potential mediating relationship with the endogenous variables through the exogenous variables. Mediation was examined through bootstrapping and the phantom model approach. Acceptable model fit for both the measurement model and structural model was obtained after a number of theoretically acceptable respecifications were completed. Results from the structural model found the direct effect from perceived economic benefits \( (B = 0.60, p < .001) \) and perceived stakeholder influence \( (B = 0.22, p < .001) \) to stadium support were significant. No other paths were statistically significant. Results from the mediation analysis found no statistically significant indirect effect between team identification, the exogenous variables, and the endogenous variable.

Findings of the current study indicated residents’ perceptions of stakeholder influence and economic benefits influenced their willingness to support a stadium project through the referendum. Respondents’ willingness to support the stadium project was influenced by their perceptions of its ability to improve the city’s economy, create jobs, and bring business to the area. Voters’ perceptions of community leaders associated with the project also influenced their willingness to support the stadium project. The findings in the current study bridge these two concepts—stakeholder influence and economic benefits—and provide empirical evidence insinuating that perceived economic benefits influence a person’s willingness to support a stadium project, extending research in this area (Crompton, 1995; Danielson, 1997; Sanderson, 2000).

In addition, the findings indicated team identification did not directly influence respondents’ willingness to support the stadium project when faced with a referendum. Overall, the findings of the current study indicated team identification may not be a necessary factor when attempting to garner voter support for a professional stadium project. Though team identification was not a significant influencer on willingness to support the stadium project directly or indirectly, it did have a significant and positive relationship with the other exogenous variables (i.e, economic benefits, noneconomic benefits, stakeholder influence), suggesting a connection with the team can influence other related factors.