Stakeholders Perspectives on Major Event Referenda

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Facilities/Events - Other (Elite Sport)                              Thursday, May 30, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)                Room: Napoleon D1
Abstract 2019-058                                              2:10 PM

In conjunction with the contentious issue of whether local communities benefit from elite sport (Kim & Petrick, 2005), referenda are increasingly used to inform decisions. Representative democracy is changing, insofar as citizens are demanding a greater role in decision making (Colombo, 2018; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). In the host selection process for the 2022 Winter Olympic, three cities (Krakow, Poland; St. Moritz, Switzerland, Munich, Germany) held referenda but bids were subsequently dropped as community members were unsupportive. There is a need to better understand how stakeholders perceive the use of referenda in elite sport contexts – particularly major events.

Most sport referenda research has been conducted in North America and based on stadia not events (Coates & Humphreys, 2006; Lenskyi, 2004; Paul & Brown, 2006). In the few sport event studies, data have mostly been collected post-referendum, with a focus on understanding why the majority voted against an Olympic bid (Coates & Wicker, 2015, Konecke, Schubert & Preuss, 2016; Siepell et al., 2016). Most studies feature secondary data or content analysis of media coverage (Coates & Wicker, 2015; Konecke et al., 2016; Siepell et al., 2016). Wicker and Coates’ (2018) research on Hamburg’s referendum to bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics is the first study using primary data collected pre-referendum. To this point, quantitative designs have dominated, no research has yet explored the perspectives of key stakeholders on prospective sport event referenda and there is also scope for a better understanding in the context of lesser profile events than the Olympics but for which bids are also controversial. In the current research, a qualitative approach was employed to explore stakeholder perspectives on a prospective referendum for a future New Zealand Commonwealth Games bid.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with high-level experiences as stakeholders of major sport event bidding processes. These individuals were drawn across the public, non-profit and private sectors of sport. In total, 13 politicians, government officials, executives of national sport organisations including the National Olympic Committee, and bid consultants were interviewed. The semi-structured interview questions probed the role of resident opinion in major sport event bid decisions, and the implications of referenda to inform the Commonwealth Games bid decision. Thematic analysis was used to explore the data.

The use of referenda (and consideration of resident opinion more broadly) was not well supported among the interviewees. Key themes explaining this lack of support include a) difficulty in telling the complete ‘story’ to enable voters to make an informed decision, b) time required to organise a referendum in line with the bid preparation process and c) the perception that key decision makers ‘know what they are doing’. The implications of this research is that while community members may increasingly call for a voice in major sport event decisions, high level decision-makers are not keen to oblige and may only engage if required by law.