
Charles E. Euchner, Boston Redevelopment Authority

For almost two decades, cities in North America have confronted a problem that seems like a unique crisis but in fact is part of a pervasive trend in modern sports: A professional franchise threatens to move to another location if it does not receive hundreds of millions of dollars in benefits from public authorities. The challenge seems unique because of the emotional stake that local political elites, downtown businesses, boosters, and fans have in the team. What invariably ensues is a protracted negotiation in which the team holds most of the cards, and public authorities can only react and improvise. This result is an ongoing public subsidization of a booming industry.

Michael Danielson has produced the most thorough and even-handed analysis yet of the politics of sports and cities. He focuses on the way that sports teams foster and exploit a sense of "place," particularly in cities where dynamic economic growth or decline undermines a more organic and abiding civic identity. Danielson carefully analyzes the operations of the major sports leagues in baseball, football, basketball, and hockey and the way they interact with state and local governments, on issues such as stadiums and expansion, and other industries with a major stake in sports (like television, movies and amusement parks, the fast-food industry, breweries, and newspapers). He pays special attention to the not-so-inevitable changes in sports over the last century and highlights decisions that have significantly shifted the course of sports-city relationships. Ultimately, Danielson concludes that the narrow business interests of team owners trump all other factors. He quotes the late Robert IRSay, who in the dark of night moved the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis in 1984: "This is my team. I own it, and I'll do whatever I want with it" (p. 67).

At the center of the dynamic of sports-city politics is the monopolistic character of leagues. This monopolistic operates at many levels. First, the major sports leagues deliberately restrict the supply of teams at the same time they encourage more and more cities to enter the bidding for teams. Second, once teams are in the leagues, they enjoy almost total control over their geographic territory. Third, the leagues dominate access to broadcasting revenues; if you cannot get on TV, then you cannot be viable in major league sports. Fourth, the leagues enter into labor agreements that are a kind of Faustian bargain: in exchange for control over labor against potential rival leagues, the leagues pay exorbitant player salaries. Fifth, team owners reinforce their control over sports (and manipulate their tax liabilities) by combining far-flung businesses from TV to restaurants and beer and liquor companies.

The leagues' extraordinary control over all aspects of sports politics is often obscured by the emotionalism and symbolism unleashed when a local authority proposes to build a new stadium and the team owner threatens to move to another city. The political is personal when it comes to battles over local sports teams; figures like Al Davis, Robert IRSay, George Steinbrenner, Ted Turner, Wayne Huizenga, and Jerry Reinsdorf take center stage, and the more important systemic forces get shunted to the side in local debates.

Even to people who have followed the business of sports for years, the financial dimension of sports politics is stunning. As Danielson notes, public authorities give franchises new stadiums at little or no rent, practice facilities, guaranteed revenues from ticket sales or broadcasting deals, free or subsidized land, a range of development opportunities, tax breaks, and a host of expensive infrastructure improvements, not to mention outright grants, worth tens of millions of dollars. As the gap between the supply and demand for teams grows, the cost rises dramatically. As recently as 1984, a brand new domed stadium in Minneapolis cost taxpayers $50 million—a lot of money, to be sure, but not a budget buster. As the century ends, the owner of one of the richest teams in sports, the New York Yankees, is demanding a facility that could cost as much as $1.2 billion.

As Danielson notes, the economic arguments for such largesse—that teams bring millions in new spending to the city, which then multiplies in the local economy—are flawed. So why does this expensive game continue? The usual answer is that fans/voters would raise Cain if a mayor let a team move. But this argument is belied by the lack of electoral punishment to mayors who presided over team transfers and by numerous voter rejections of stadium deals. The real answer lies in the sports industry's monopolism, which gives teams decisive leverage in their dealings with urban officials. The one-shot patronage of new stadiums for well-connected urban elites (e.g., banks, unions, developers) and the incessant boosterism of newspapers and other sports supporters also helps the franchise's cause.

The usual public policy proposals to confront professional sports include government regulation, forcing leagues to expand, encouraging rival leagues, and fostering cooperative arrangements that bind teams to cities. But never do policymakers consider attacking the heart of the problem, namely, the leagues' monopolistic control. Danielson does not explore a number of ways that restructuring of leagues could change the balance of power in sports politics. Such restructuring might include overturning league rules about public ownership, territorial exclusivity, player sales, minor league development, and the relationships between the big leagues and the minor leagues and collegiate sports associations. The boldest move would be to break up the big leagues. Ma Bell style.

Danielson's greatest virtue is also his biggest shortcoming. His study offers the most careful, detailed, thorough, and even-tempered study of the sports business in a burgeoning academic and journalistic literature. But he often fails to connect the dots and boldly highlight the underlying forces that drive the whole process. Still, no one can study the politics and economic of sports without turning first to Danielson. That is a considerable achievement.


Robin Kolodny, Temple University

Christine deGregorio has assumed a major task in this work, which explores the relationship between Congress and the organized interests who wish to influence its work. To do this, DeGregorio undertakes a two-front approach: examining the
assumptions we have about both the nature of leadership in Congress and the extent of influence the interest community has with our nation’s lawmakers.

DeGregorio’s central argument is that we do not appreciate the complex relationships between leaders and groups. Furthermore, we credit formal party leaders in Congress with a monopoly on power in Congress and underestimate the important informational role advocacy groups can play in the public policy process. The author first wants to reexamine notions of what it means to be a leader in the House, including an examination of the role of congressional staff, and next to test whether groups that have influence over lawmakers have such influence because of their resource (money) advantages. To do this, DeGregorio has used a somewhat unconventional method: elite focused interviews of 97 members of the advocacy community. She has asked these advocates to identify House leaders on one of six public policy issues featured in the 100th Congress and then to assess their own satisfaction with the results they garnered. The 97 respondents represent a broad cross-section of the advocacy community in both sector (public or private) and type of group, as well as the resources each group possesses. The six bills studied also provide a good mix of policy arenas, complexity, scope, political conflict, and salience. DeGregorio’s method is meticulously discussed in two appendixes.

On the topic of House leaders, DeGregorio finds that advocates cite committee and subcommittee leaders as being much more important than either formal party leaders or Rules Committee members, and she mentions (but never really elaborates) that some members without portfolio (obscure, that is) also make this list. She also finds that senior level staff members, especially those on committee staff, also are mentioned, though not as much as some cynical congressional observers might think. In this sense, DeGregorio has made one of the contributions she claims: a broadening of the definition of congressional leadership. While the concept of leadership itself is inherently problematic, due to the lack of a reliable followership among individually elected representatives, DeGregorio has shown that a number of individuals assume leadership roles in the formulation of public policy and that different individuals will emerge as leaders based on the topic under consideration and the stage of the legislation in the political process. By proving that formal party leaders are not the focal point of advocates’ congressional partnerships, DeGregorio exposes the limits of traditional leadership studies.

The other side of the project is to examine the role of the advocates in the political process. Here DeGregorio asks several intriguing questions about organized interests resources, access, and success. In addition to the traditional interest group categories of professional/occupational groups, corporations, and public interest concerns, the executive branch is included in the mix. DeGregorio makes a convincing case for the inclusion of executive branch officials as organized interests rather than simple extensions of the president. More important, she demonstrates that information from advocates is a more valuable commodity to many officeholders than other resources, such as campaign contributions, in gaining access to lawmakers. Indeed, the relationship between lawmakers and advocates is portrayed as one of complex interdependence, with lawmakers courting advocacy group endorsements for legislative initiatives as much as the reverse occurs. DeGregorio’s argument is entirely on target here, and her discussion of the advocates’ awareness of their own role as political leverage between lawmakers is quite insightful.

DeGregorio’s study is thoughtful and carefully executed. Still, there are several things I wish the author had done differently. First, I wish DeGregorio had given us more examples of the kinds of relationships she was describing. She spoke to 97 advocates about six different legislative arenas and only gives a few short pages of description on the particulars. Without a fuller discussion of these interactions, I am left wondering about the nature of her findings. For example, under what conditions do “obscure” members become leaders? What difference does it make that advocates make their initiatives primarily toward committee and subcommittee leaders (that is, do we know that any of their efforts remained part of the final bill)? How did such interactions enhance the fortunes of the advocacy groups and the leaders themselves? With the short text of 143 pages, I wish the author had given us another twenty of thirty pages with some insight into the hundreds of examples she must have at her disposal. Second, I wish she had spent more time examining the congressional leadership aspects of her study. The book predominantly covers the issues of access and advocacy over leadership. Part of this reflects the bias of the study: 97 advocates, but no members of Congress. Though DeGregorio begins her inquiry with the help of senior level staff, it would have been nice to have more staff or members interviewed as a control. As it stands, the data may suffer from underlying bias from the advocates, especially when it comes to describing their success at gaining access and their own level of satisfaction with their lobbying efforts. Though I think DeGregorio’s analysis could be more complete, students of interest groups, congressional committees, and congressional leadership will find much food for thought.


Richard Piper, University of Tampa

John Donahue’s book is the latest contribution to what the author accurately describes as the “endless argument” over the proper balance between the national government and the states in the federal system of the United States. Like recent works on the subject by Paul E. Peterson (The Price of Federalism, 1995) and Alice M. Rivlin (Revising the American Dream, 1992), this book addresses both political scientists and a broader audience of policymakers, students, and concerned citizens, and it does so in a fashion that is both readable and informative. Its greatest contrast with most other recent books on federalism, and even more so with much of the prevailing conventional wisdom among politicians in Washington and the state capitals, lies in its emphasis on the risks of decentralization. It is less novel in this respect than its author suggests, however.

Where Peterson and Rivlin both distinguish between “developmental” and “redistributive” public policies and favor devolution to the states of primary responsibilities in the former domain, Donahue casts doubt on the existence of a clear dichotomy between these two spheres of public policy. Although he reinforces much of what Peterson, Rivlin, and others have suggested about the perils of a “race to the bottom” among state-centered social welfare programs and about the obstacles to effective state redistribution of wealth in general, Donahue also warns of danger in state-driven developmental realms, such as business attraction, education, and job training. In this respect, his book resembles David Robertson and Dennis Judd’s The Development of American Public Policy (1989), though, surprisingly, Donahue never cites it.