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Article

Politicians' Personal Legacies from Olympic Bids and Referenda—An Analysis of Individual Risks and Opportunities

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Abstract: The popularity of staging Olympic Games has dropped in democratic countries as a series of failed referenda and withdrawn bids as well as protests against mega sport events have shown in recent years. Nevertheless, there still are democratically elected office-holders willing to become involved in an Olympic bid despite the high probability of public opposition and the threat of an almost unwinnable referendum. This conceptual study analyses the individual risk management that these politicians have to concern themselves with because of their involvement in Olympic bids and referenda. It does so by looking at possible ‘personal legacies’ the politicians can obtain. It is interesting to note that although the size of such legacies will vary, they can result irrespective of the outcome of a bid or a referendum and can have positive, negative, or neutral effects for the politician(s) in question. As will be shown, personal legacies can also be obtained by opponents of Olympic bidding ambitions, which is not the only finding that is problematic particularly for the IOC and National Olympic Committees interested in hosting Olympic Games or other sport events.

Keywords: Olympic bids; legacy; mega sport event; bidding process; referendum



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1. Introduction

The bidding race for the Winter Olympic Games in 2022 saw an unprecedented number of cities withdrawing their bid due to failed referenda or political concerns. Throughout the process, all of the eight European contenders withdrew before the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision on the host. Eventually, the IOC elected Beijing (China) over Almaty (Kazakhstan) as the host city on 31 July 2015 (Könecke et al. 2016). So, other than expected at the beginning of the bidding process, the IOC only had a very limited choice in terms of the number of remaining bidders (only two), political backgrounds (only from non-democratic countries), and geographic regions (as all of the traditional European winter sport countries had dropped their bids; Butler 2016a; Könecke and de Nooij 2017). The bidding process for the Summer Games in 2024 showed a similar pattern of failed referenda and withdrawn bids that again left the IOC with two potential hosts to choose from. Only this time, the organization changed its original plan and awarded the Games in 2028 as well, thus preventing to antagonize an attractive potential host by refusing its bid. Now, Paris will host the Games in 2024 and Los Angeles the ones in 2028 (Carroll and Melander 2017; International Olympic Committee 2017; Könecke and de Nooij 2017). Before the IOC elected Milan—Cortina d'Ampezzo (Italy) as the host for the 2026 Winter Olympic Games, referenda or threats thereof had again ended the bidding ambitions of five potential host cities.

Against this backdrop and taking Whitson's and Horne's observation that ‘hosting is [. . .] often the project of political [. . .] elites’ (Whitson and Horne 2006, p. 73) into account, the motivation for this paper is sparked by the following observations:

1. Even before referenda became common in the process, it has been rather unlikely that a city's bid for Olympic Games would be successful as usually only one host city was elected and the contenders could frequently expect to meet a strong competition;
2. Very briefly after the failed referendum ended Munich's ambitions regarding 2022, two other German cities, Hamburg and Berlin, tried to become the nation's Applicant City for the Games in 2024. Furthermore, several other major cities from democratic countries were willing to bid for this event (and also the Winter Games in 2026) even though it is quite apparent that bidding for and staging mega sport events raises concerns in most countries nowadays (e.g., [Könecke et al. 2016](#)). Besides unsuccessful referenda, the protests in Brazil that targeted the hosting of and the expenditures for the football World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016 were another exemplary proof of this opposition;
3. Unlike in Switzerland, referenda do usually not constitute an integral element of the political systems of the other European countries that have held referenda on Olympic bids, such as Austria, Germany, or Poland.

Keeping these observations in mind, the question has to be asked why politicians in democratic countries still willingly engage in an endeavor which is unlikely to succeed because of its general nature, is very likely to face strong public opposition, and has a high chance of failing in a referendum¹. This is especially so since almost all of the referenda that were held on Olympic bids in recent years failed. Moreover—as will be discussed later on—even a supportive outcome in Oslo did not prevent an eventual withdrawal of the bid due to political reasons. Considering that politicians in democratic countries depend on a favorable public opinion to obtain and retain political power, they should be expected to support likely popular and/or successful projects. Consequently, and even though a politician might be very fond of sport, it could seem highly irrational on an individual level to support an Olympic bid because of the potentially detrimental effects it could have on a political career.

However, and even though the economic idea of rational behaviour has been under fire at least since [Simon \(1955\)](#), irrationality is an unlikely explanation for the behavior of senior politicians in major cities in democratic countries. These officeholders generally have succeeded in a number of elections to obtain such an office, which indicates that they must be able to make decisions that maximize professional welfare in the long run (a key assumption of rational choice theory). Therefore, the promotion of an Olympic bid or a referendum should usually not be a beginner's fault. Even though sometimes actors rather new to the political system can become involved, the common situation should rather be that seasoned politicians initiate and uphold Olympic bids. Moreover, newly elected ones do not face a bid unexpectedly, as could be seen by the example of Rome's former mayor Virginia Raggi, who had strongly opposed staging Olympic Games during the electoral campaign that brought her into office ([New York Times 2016](#)).

Even though it is not to be expected that Olympic bids are primarily motivated by political self-interest, these considerations show that politicians will (have to) evaluate the risks and opportunities of their participation in such an endeavor before getting involved and/or throughout the process. The considerations also show that the decisions made in this regard should usually correspond to rational choice theory in that sense that they should maximize individual welfare in the long run (at least to large extent).

A key aspect in the corresponding considerations should be possible 'personal (or individual) legacies' that can result from initiating, supporting, and even opposing Olympic bids and referenda. As will be discussed later, 'legacies' can generally be understood as a set of structures originating from a bidding process (including a referendum) or an Olympic Games, which can bear positive or negative consequences or may turn out to be neutral, for example if they are not 'activated'.

This study aims at analyzing which 'personal legacies' can result for politicians involved in Olympic bids and referenda. It also shows that personal legacies have the potential to influence a politician's professional career in an advantageous or disadvanta-

geous way—or not at all. It will be outlined that personal legacies result irrespective of the outcome of a bid and are the reason why politicians face a number of risks and opportunities due to their involvement. As will be seen, personal legacies and the corresponding risks and opportunities also result if politicians do not actively strive for or concern themselves with them.

The main contributions of this paper are the following: Generally, it is a contribution to the research on event legacies and bidding for Olympic Games (e.g., [Baade and Matheson 2016](#); [Brückner and Pappa 2015](#); [Chalip et al. 2016](#); [de Nooij and van den Berg 2017](#); [Könecke et al. 2016](#); [Preuss and Werkmann 2011](#); [Rundio and Heere 2016](#)). These fields of research are broadened by focusing on politically relevant individual legacies that are mainly generated prior to the event through the bidding process and—if one is held—a referendum. Thus, this study also contributes a new aspect to the growing research on event-related referenda (e.g., [Baade and Matheson 2016](#); [Brückner and Pappa 2015](#); [Coates and Wicker 2015](#); [Könecke et al. 2016](#); [Rundio and Heere 2016](#)), which have become a major factor in bidding processes in democratic countries.

However, so far, no comparable study focusing on legacies or the corresponding risks and opportunities for individual politicians has been published. This is particularly astonishing because even heads of governments of major countries have prominently been involved in Olympic bids or Games in the past. One example is former journalist Boris Johnson who built a considerable international ‘media legacy’ (will be defined later in the paper) as mayor of London when the city hosted the Games in 2012. Afterwards, Johnson made use of the inherent opportunities by ‘activating’ (see later) this legacy when spearheading the Brexit campaign before the referendum in Great Britain. Later on, he even became Prime Minister. Current German chancellor Olaf Scholz’ biography shows parallels as he was First Mayor in Hamburg when the city worked towards hosting the Olympic Games in 2024. After Hamburg’s bidding ambitions were ended by a dismissive referendum in November 2015, Scholz became Germany’s Minister of Finance in early 2018 and was elected German chancellor after the federal elections held in 2021. Of course, it should not be forgotten that there are also examples of politicians whose association with an Olympic bid had negative effects for them. An example for someone who incurred negative effects in the long run is the former Mayor of Montreal, Jean Drapeau, who was the driving force behind the city’s bidding ambitions but, as [Todd \(2016\)](#) describes, was also made responsible for a number of negative effects associated with the event later on.

The analysis in the paper is generally a theoretical one. It would certainly be interesting to supplement the theoretical considerations with empirical data, for instance from interviews with office holders. However, it was not expected that these would freely share their actual evaluation of personal risks and opportunities regarding an Olympic bid. Moreover, even though people who closely worked with or are related to office holders who were in charge of bidding processes confirmed the assessments made in this study (for instance, after conference presentations on the topic), none of them were willing to formally participate in the research to protect their privacy. Accordingly, a conceptual approach was chosen that—as has been explained above—is generally rooted in rational choice theory and past research on the legacy of mega sport events.

The following parts of this paper are structured as follows: In the next chapter, personal legacies which politicians can draw from Olympic bidding processes and Olympic Games are addressed. The first part of said chapter looks at the literature that outlines potential reasons for staging Olympic Games. Afterwards, a general concept of (Olympic) legacy is introduced. Personal legacy is defined thereafter before the analytical findings are described in the final part of the chapter. In the subsequent chapter, referenda are introduced into the analysis. This is done by first addressing Olympic referenda on a general level. Afterwards, their potential to influence politicians’ personal legacies is outlined. The final chapter contains the discussion and the conclusion.

2. Olympic Bids and Legacies

2.1. Motivators for Bidding for Olympic Games

In academic research, a number of different expectations linked to bidding for Olympic Games have been identified. For instance, [Fourie and Santana-Gallego \(2011\)](#) pointed out that boosting tourism arrivals can be one major reason to do so. However, they also showed that touristic effects greatly vary due to a number of factors. [Solberg and Preuss \(2007\)](#), for instance, mentioned methodological difficulties when measuring touristic effects of such events and a notion to overstate socioeconomic advantages in the pre-event phase that could be spurred by an opportunity to obtain funding. [Whitson and Horne \(2006\)](#) posited that this common overstatement is facilitated by a lack of transparency in the calculation of event profits and losses and the severe difficulty in answering the question which costs and benefits to include or to exclude. However, particularly in recent studies, the notion has been dominant that hosting the Olympics is almost never economically viable for a region (e.g., [Baade and Matheson 2016](#); [de Nooij and van den Berg 2017](#); [Rose and Spiegel 2011](#)).

Yet, major cities are still willing to start a bid despite the low probability of success (many cities give up and only one wins), the likely public opposition (possibly manifesting in a referendum), and the fact that already bidding itself is a costly endeavor. [Baade and Matheson \(2016\)](#) named three main reasons why a region or a country could (still) want to host Olympic Games: (1) the fact that ‘[l]arge projects always create (some) winners’ ([Baade and Matheson 2016](#), p. 213), (2) the egos of political leaders and their willingness to put their country’s political and economic power on display, and (3) the winner’s curse, which motivates the bidder that most overestimates the potential advantages of staging the Games to win the bid. Furthermore, they stated that ‘the Olympics can serve as a catalyst for urban redevelopment and to generate the political will required to undertake needed infrastructure investments’ ([Baade and Matheson 2016](#), p. 211). However, they also pointed out that it is at least questionable if alternative investments would have yielded a less favorable outcome. [de Nooij and van den Berg \(2017\)](#) provided a compatible albeit slightly more extensive list to explain the motivation for pursuing a bid: (1) early political enthusiasm, (2) tying side-projects to the bid to raise political support, (3) biased reading of history, (4) the winners curse, (5) redistribution and lobbying, (6) a media bias in favor of hosting, and (7) boosting happiness and pride of residents.

For some bidders, it is of relevance that bidding for and hosting a mega sport event can increase exports especially for developing economies. In this regard, [Rose and Spiegel \(2011, p. 653\)](#) stated that ‘when a country wishes to enter the world stage, it can signal this to both domestic and international constituencies by offering to host a mega-event’. Interestingly, they observed that the positive economic development does not only occur for countries that eventually host the Olympics but for the unsuccessful bidders as well. Even though their claim was that for the latter the effect is ‘similar in size to that experienced by actual Olympic hosts’ ([Rose and Spiegel 2011, p. 654](#)), Brückner and Pappa described it as rather fleeting:

‘In both our empirical exercise and the theoretical model, news about Olympic Games makes output and investment surge already at the time of the bidding. In unsuccessful bidding countries, the agents’ optimism turns out to be unjustified, and as a result, the economy returns quickly to its original trend, while hosting economies enjoy quantitatively large and significant positive effects from hosting’ ([Brückner and Pappa 2015, p. 1364](#)).

Yet, as [Baade and Matheson \(2016\)](#) pointed out with reference to other studies, all of these positive macroeconomic effects might be attributable to a selection bias and not to an Olympic influence. However, even considering that economic effects may be (rather) irrelevant on a national level, it can be retained that entering the bidding race for Olympic Games leads to the ‘news shock’ postulated by Brückner and Pappa in the title of their paper and further ‘important anticipation effects’ ([Brückner and Pappa 2015, p. 1340](#)). This is naturally also true of the event itself. Against this backdrop, it is insightful to take a look at the legacy of sport events, which will be done in the next sub-chapter.

2.2. Legacies of Mega Sport Events and Their Bidding Processes

Preuss defined the legacy of Olympic Games as follows: ‘Irrespective of the time of production and space, legacy is all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by a sport event that remain longer than the event itself’ (Preuss 2007, p. 211). Legacy can also result from bidding for an event, since Preuss (2015, p. 647) noted that it ‘can derive from structures already completed before the event’ as well. Examples are the above-mentioned ‘anticipation effects’ (Brückner and Pappa 2015, p. 1340) and the corresponding media coverage. Obviously, the potential of legacies to create an effect does not generally vanish when a city drops out of the bidding process or is not awarded the event. However, as has been discussed above, such developments can strongly influence the size, potential, and longevity of the structures (Brückner and Pappa 2015).

Preuss (2015) named infrastructure (e.g., stadia, roads, housing), knowledge (e.g., scientific knowledge, event management know how), policy (e.g., sport policies, laws), networks (e.g., political networks, networks in the security sector), and emotions (image, memories, stories) as different types of event legacy. He also pointed out that these frequently remain a ‘latent legacy’ until they are actively put to use (activated): ‘For example, a network is only activated when a contact is used for [a] cooperation of some kind’ (Preuss 2015, p. 656). The concept of activation is closely linked to the ‘leveraging’ of an event (Chalip and Leyns 2002), which ‘refers to strategic and intentional tactics that seek to derive benefits from the hosting of sport events’ (Wood et al. 2018). However, because this paper is not limited to an analysis of politicians’ ex-ante ‘strategic and intentional tactics’ to activate event legacies, leveraging is not considered prominently hereafter but rather the broader concept of activation because a politician can try to activate a legacy even though s/he did not plan or even intend to do so before.

Since mega events have the potential to create a variety of legacies, the question how to attain and guide these legacies in the desired direction has gained considerable interest (e.g., Boukas et al. 2013; Chalip 2006; Chalip et al. 2016; Smith 2009; VanWynsberghe et al. 2012; Veal et al. 2012). Pre-event legacies have also been scrutinized. An example is the effect of the run-up to the Olympic Games in London on the population’s participation in physical activity and sport (Bretherton et al. 2016). Generally, the volume ‘Leveraging Legacies from Sport Mega-Events’ (Grix 2014) provides a rather recent overview over the field. Yet, as can be seen by Chalip’s contribution to the book, further analysis is still called for (Chalip 2014), especially because some authors question if the opportunity to leverage the latent legacy of mega events is not but a mere excuse for still staging them if considering their unsatisfactory economic performance (e.g., Smith 2013).

Regardless of the question whether latent or not, a legacy eventually loses its potential to create an effect ‘and therefore its utility. People get older, and networks and memories disappear. Knowledge and skills become outdated’ (Preuss 2015, p. 657). Furthermore, event legacies can also have unfavorable effects, such as maintenance costs for an unused or underutilized stadium, salaries for a bidding committee that cannot be released immediately after dropping a bid, or (lasting) negative publicity stemming from Olympic ambitions (which could be considered a ‘media legacy’—cf. underneath). In order to support the creation of positive legacy-effects and to diminish negative ones, Ritchie (2000) suggested the development of a strategic plan for the post-event use of the legacy at a very early stage (which would mean to leverage the event legacy—see above).

Summing up, legacy will hereafter be understood as different tangible or intangible structures stemming from bidding for or staging Olympic Games. These structures have the potential to create advantageous, disadvantageous, or no effects. In order to create effects, an activation of latent structures can be necessary.

2.3. Politicians’ Personal Legacies from Bidding for and Staging Olympic Games

According to the introduction, it can be assumed that senior politicians responsible for an Olympic bid frequently take welfare maximizing decisions regarding their own

career. Considering the two claims that (a) '[a]gents that endorse [...] the staging of mega-events usually do so out of naivety or self-interest' (Rose and Spiegel 2011, p. 652) and (b) '[l]arge projects always create (some) winners' (Baade and Matheson 2016, p. 213), it can be concluded that such politicians will regularly strive to obtain an advantageous outcome for themselves. This does not mean that their endorsement of an Olympic bid is always (primarily) motivated by self-interest. But the vast public exposure, the probable public opposition, and the long duration of the bidding process are known. Due to this, senior politicians will (have to) concern themselves with the personal consequences of their involvement in such an endeavor sooner or later.

Against this backdrop, the following analysis aims at outlining the 'personal legacy' which can result for politicians from their involvement in bidding for and/or staging Olympic Games. In this paper, the primary focus will be on legacies that have the potential to influence a politician professionally. Like all legacies, these structures are usually latent until activated and can be planned or unplanned. Corresponding to Preuss' (2015) considerations regarding cities, politicians' personal legacies will differ from person to person and case to case. This is also why the following analysis does not relate to one specific person or office but is a general collection of ideas regarding the question which 'personal legacies' could generally result for politicians involved in a bid or an Olympic Games. This means that not all of the described legacies will result in all cases or for all politicians concerned. In the end, the specific context, the motivation to create legacies for oneself, the degree of involvement and many other factors influence which legacies will result for a specific individual (or group of individuals).

It has previously been mentioned that Preuss (2015) classified legacies into five different structures: infrastructure, policy, knowledge, emotions, and networks. In the following analysis, it will be explained in how far these different types of legacies can be related to the personal level of politicians. Moreover, it is shown that 'media' has to be added as another type of legacy for individual politicians and in general in Figure 1. The final analytical step of this chapter is devoted to the potential influence, the outcome of the bidding process and the success of staging Olympic Games can have on a politician's personal legacies.

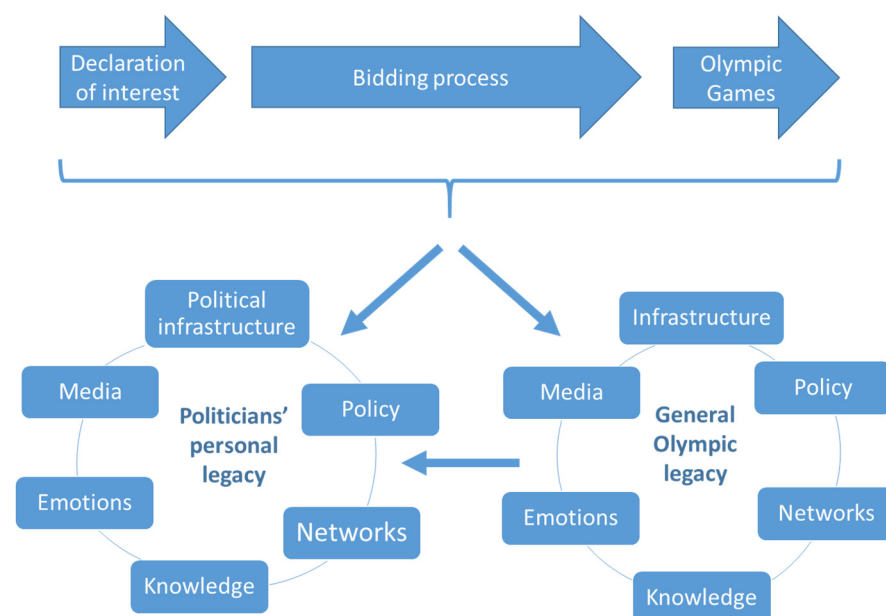


Figure 1. Sources of politicians' personal legacies from Olympic bidding processes and Games.

First and maybe foremost, a politician's involvement in an Olympic endeavor will obviously help her/him to create and strengthen different types of networks. Obviously, sport-related networks are relevant. Since major sport organizations are very well connected in society, politics, and the business world, they are resourceful domestic and

international power brokers. Thus, supporting and promoting an Olympic bid can enable a politician to effectively win fans and members of sport organizations as voters or supporters. Furthermore, the politician obtains access to the networks sport officials and sport organizations sustain. To strengthen her/his 'Olympic ties' to a specific sport or sport in general, a politician could also take over an office in a sport organization. This strategic move should enable him/her to prolong the latency of this network-legacy and to activate it more easily if need be.

Politicians can also further their personal network outside of the sport world. Due to the international scope of an Olympic bid, the people closely connected to it will become directly acquainted with a considerable number of very high ranking national and international politicians and officials. Moreover, access to and acquaintance with important actors from business and society can be expected since these regularly show interest and support for Olympic bids. This is in line with the general ideas of and recent discussion concerning urban regime theory. The theory basically describes how informal arrangements and formal relationships between actors in society and the business world on the one hand and in politics on the other contribute to the governance of a city (Mossberger and Stoker 2001; Smith 2019). However, 'a longstanding pattern of cooperation rather than a temporary coalition' (Mossberger and Stoker 2001, p. 829) is a key component of urban regimes. This can also be the case for networks constituting a legacy of an Olympic bid or Games, but legacy-networks can also be short-lived if they are not maintained or activated.

Nevertheless, it should be considered that Smith (2019) observed that the structure of urban regimes is influenced by and has to adapt to globalization and its impact on how and with whom politicians cooperate and connect on the regional level. This leads to the assumption that the opportunity to enhance a personal network by getting involved in an Olympic endeavor would be especially attractive for ambitious officeholders interested in widening their sphere of influence. That means that somebody holding an office on a regional, state, or national level has a great opportunity to further his or her network on a national and/or international level within and outside of politics by getting involved in an Olympic endeavor. Without such an involvement, obtaining access to a comparably large number of potentially important personal contacts would most likely require considerable effort and luck. Moreover, even though the political network might seem particularly relevant at first sight, an enhanced personal network in other areas should not be underestimated in terms of its political value. Furthermore, such networks can open other professional opportunities within and outside of politics. After a lost election, the latter might even prove more valuable than the former.

Structures in the fields of knowledge and emotions are included as personal legacy in Figure 1 as well. On an individual level, examples hereof are the perception of one or more politicians as being sporty, sport friendly, and/or advocates of sport. Due to the great popularity of sport (e.g., Sloan 1989; Trail et al. 2003) this association enables politicians to build a legacy from the halo effects (i.e., the 'spillover effects' of the positive image) of sport and its popular figures (athletes, coaches, functionaries) and the very profound passion that ties many people to sport. Moreover, the perception of a politician's interest in and close relation with sport can communicate a valuable proximity to 'regular people' due to a shared common interest. Corresponding to Baade and Matheson's (2016) observation, it can also be posited that a politician's willingness to put forward an Olympic bid creates knowledge and emotions concerning his/her trust in the political and economic power of the region s/he represents. This means that s/he is showing great appreciation for the region by her/his support for the bid, which should be appreciated by the population as well.

As can be seen in Figure 1, infrastructure can usually not be considered a personal legacy for politicians because it cannot directly be leveraged. For example, successfully realizing a construction project due to an Olympic bid cannot create a personal advantage or disadvantage for a politician per se. To create an effect, the act in question has to be noticed by the public and/or other relevant groups and linked to the politician (it has to be

‘personalized’). This usually implies that it will also be evaluated as either desirable or not, i.e., knowledge, emotions, and/or a media legacy (see below) are created. Moreover, the relevant project could yield networks with people from the political, construction, finance, and/or other sectors. If this transfer of the general legacy ‘infrastructure’ into these types of personal legacy does not occur, it cannot create relevant effects for the politician unless there is a private use (e.g., if the politician can use a sport facility for private purposes). However, these private advantages would not influence the politician’s career, which disqualifies them as ‘personal political legacy’.

The only exception from this rule is ‘political infrastructure’. This type of infrastructure consists of formal infrastructure which is at the disposal of the politician. Examples are personal staff or access to staff of the politician’s party, an administration, or a government. Specifically, these could be communication departments, the Olympic Public Authority (like the one introduced for Rio 2016), legacy commissions, or other units that have been established for a purpose related to the Olympic Games. Political infrastructure can usually directly be activated and thus create effects for a politician very quickly. Naturally, like all legacies, political infrastructure is also prone to dissolve once the event or the bid is over. An example would be a communication department that has originally been set up for an Olympic bid but also becomes involved in an electoral campaign that is running at the same time. Consequently, ‘political infrastructure’ is included as a personal legacy in Figure 1.

‘Policy’ is also included as a personal legacy in Figure 1 because policy effects can be created or facilitated by Olympic bids or Games that would. Very often, it is of relevance in this regard that campaigns surrounding Olympic bids have a strong potential to draw attention away from other political issues because of the considerable media coverage (see hereafter) and public awareness they create. This means that an Olympic bid can be used to prevent high public involvement in and/or opposition to other political issues. If these issues can thus be furthered by a politician, for example, by successfully putting them to a vote in parliament when the attention is focused on the Olympic bid, a policy-legacy is attained. Moreover, an Olympic bid also has the potential to tie other political projects to it, which also constitutes an opportunity to create a personal legacy of the policy-type. If and how such a policy-legacy creates effects for a politician in the long run, largely depends on how s/he is willing and able to activate it afterwards.

Just like bidding and hosting cities (Brückner and Pappa 2015), politicians can also obtain a ‘media legacy’. As has already been described, Olympic bidding ambitions usually bring about a considerable boost in national and international media attention (cf. also Preuss and Alfs 2011), vastly increasing the media visibility of key politicians as well. This corresponds to the free rider mentality discussed by Preuss (2004). He observed that cities can be motivated to bid or to discuss a bid just by the image effects and the general support that can thus be generated—even without a real chance of winning. To reduce free riding, the IOC introduced a non-refundable fee for each bidder and banned any international promotion during the application stage. Even though this increases sunk costs and hold up costs for a bidding city, it neither creates direct individual costs for a politician nor does it diminish the general media attention that is created by announcing a bid. This surge in media attention can be particularly attractive for ambitious local politicians seeking to advance their career on a national or even an international level.

Over the course of a bidding process, a politician can establish different types of legacy due to the media attention. Comparable to policy and most infrastructure, the media coverage can lead to knowledge and emotions. Networks with reporters and other media personnel can also be built or strengthened. Moreover, a special legacy consisting of the willingness of the media to accept the politician himself as a relevant media content can result. If this is the case, the news value (e.g., Lippmann [1922] 1965) of all information regarding the politician rises, which in turn can spur further media interest. Since the media are a key protagonist in the opinion building process in modern societies (e.g., Kim et al. 2015, 2002; Könecke et al. 2016), this effect should be considered an independent

legacy on an individual and the general level. Accordingly, media is included as a sixth legacy structure for both, the politicians' and the general Olympic legacy in Figure 1.

Regarding the sources of a politician's personal legacy, Figure 1 indicates that they are twofold: First, they can stem directly from the involvement in the bidding process and/or Olympic Games. An example is a personal network in the sport sector. Second, it could already be seen that personal legacy can also be derived from the general Olympic legacy. An example is a politician's involvement in a maintenance project for Olympic infrastructure (a general legacy). The politician would be able to build a personal network in the construction sector, which could eventually be leveraged to create personal advantages.

General Olympic legacies and personal legacies are arranged in circles in Figure 1 because legacies and/or their capability to create effects frequently are interdependent. For instance, this is the case if voters base their voting decision on knowledge about a politician's involvement in an Olympic bid. Usually, this knowledge will be drawn from the media and will build legacies in the fields of knowledge and emotions as well.

Figure 2 adds to Figure 1 by showing that personal legacies can either cause effects directly or indirectly. Direct effects are created if legacies have immediate effects. One example of a direct effect are emotions created through a politician's involvement in an Olympic bid that have an effect on whether or not (certain) voters vote for the politician in an election. Direct effects occur without any efforts of the politician to activate or leverage specific legacies. Indirect effects, on the other hand, occur, if certain legacies are latent and have to be activated or leveraged prior to generating an impact for the politician. Again, an example thereof is a communication department set up for an Olympic bid that a politician then actively involves in an ongoing electoral campaign even though this is none of the department's actual tasks. Another example is a personal acquaintance or network that originates from a bidding process that is put to use at a later point in time for another professional purpose.

Figure 2 also indicates that these personal legacies can have positive, negative, or neutral effects. This is so because a specific legacy can, for instance, causes citizens to vote or not to vote for a politician, which means that a positive or a negative effect is the result. If the specific legacy does not affect voters' behavior in an election, it has a neutral effect.

Finally, it is important to briefly consider how the outcome of a bid or staging the Games can affect politicians' personal legacy:

1. If a politician is involved in staging a successful Olympic Games, s/he should usually be able to obtain a strong personal legacy yielding strong positive personal effects. This should be especially true if the politician has also been involved in the bidding process because s/he will then be remembered as one of the people who brought the Games to the region. A generally similar but somewhat weaker legacy could be obtained if a politician leaves the office after a successful bid but before the Games are successfully staged;
2. If the Olympics are generally not considered a success (e.g., because of large cost overruns), personal legacies still result. However, they will usually incur more negative effects than otherwise, such as a negative reputation effect (knowledge) or bad media coverage. However, even if the politician loses her/his office due to the Olympics (a very negative legacy-effect), leveraging a personal Olympic legacy for a career in another line of work might still be possible. Due to the long run-up period to the event, it is not unlikely that the former initiators of the bid have switched office at the time of the event anyway. This might even have happened as a result of their personal legacy from the bid—for instance if they have been elected to a higher office. In this situation, coping with the actual event and its outcomes has to be dealt with by their successors;
3. If the bid is not successful, personal legacy still results, but it will likely be less pronounced than it would have been otherwise. An unsuccessful bid leaves a shorter overall time in which a legacy can be created, less money spent during the process, and less opportunities to create strong and lasting emotions. Nevertheless, this

constellation is especially interesting since many bids have been withdrawn before the IOC's final vote in recent years. Moreover, because it is usually no disadvantage for a politician to publicly demonstrate her/his firm belief in a city or a region, the politician might as well do so by proclaiming bidding ambitions for Olympic Games. If the bid fails or is withdrawn, a politician might still be able to obtain numerous positive personal legacy-effects. In an effort to do so, the politician would probably be well-advised to make good use of the media legacy in order to shape the public's opinion according to personal needs (on shaping public opinion through media see e.g., [Kim et al. 2002, 2015](#); [Könecke et al. 2016](#)). Ideally, that would mean to leverage this legacy by having an ex ante strategy in place.

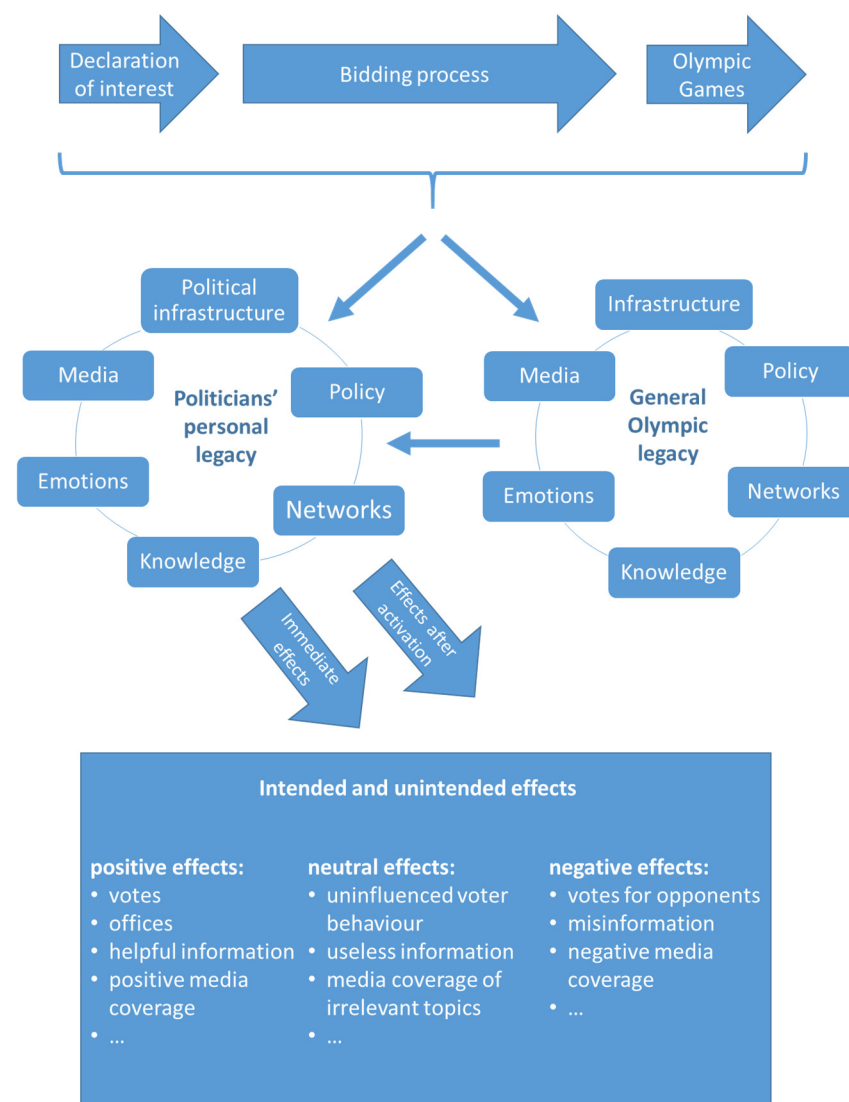


Figure 2. Sources and effects of politicians' personal legacies from Olympic bidding processes and Games.

3. Olympic Referenda and Legacies

3.1. Referenda and Olympic Games

Until not too long ago, research has frequently shown public support for staging mega sport events (e.g., [Atkinson et al. 2008](#); [Barget and Gougnet 2007](#); [Heisey 2009](#); [Heyne and Süßmuth 2007](#)). However, as the description in the introduction has shown, this support has not been present in the most recent bidding processes anymore. During these processes, many bids have been ended or prevented by referenda or the mere threat thereof.

Such referenda on Olympic bids or Games have not been common in many countries even though they have a richer tradition in others. In North America, for instance, different referenda have been held in previous decades ([Chappelet 2021](#)). One example is the referendum prior to the 2002 Winter Games. Salt Lake City (Utah) organized a poll that yielded a favorable vote (57 percent) in 1989 ([Guala 2009](#)). As [Andranovich et al. \(2001\)](#) pointed out, this referendum to use part of the sales tax revenues for the construction of Olympic facilities was the only one in which US-American citizens could vote during the bidding process. In 1994, there was a successful vote in Atlanta on issuing two bonds for the 1996 Games, whereas the 1978 vote in Los Angeles refused to use general city funds for the Games in 1980. These two polls were held after the IOC had awarded the Games to the cities ([Andranovich et al. 2001](#)). This was also the case for the referendum held in Colorado in 1972, that blocked the provision of additional state funds for the Winter Olympic Games 1976. The outcome of this referendum had the effect that Denver had to refuse to stage the event and the IOC had to look for another host. Eventually, Innsbruck (Austria) hosted this edition of the Winter Games ([Carpenter 2022](#)). [Hiller and Wanner \(2011\)](#) also looked at a referendum in Vancouver in Canada that showed support for the Winter Games in 2010.

In Europe, voting on Olympic Games has a comparably rich tradition in Switzerland. [Guala \(2009\)](#), [Maennig \(2017\)](#) and [Chappelet \(2021\)](#) mention a number of Swiss referenda with positive, dismissive, or unclear outcomes. However, referenda are a central element of Swiss democracy, which is why they are also held on sport events. Nonetheless, there are some examples of Olympic referenda held in other European countries dating back to before the turn of the century. One was held in the Italian Aosta Valley (bordering Switzerland). In 1992, 84.7 percent of the valid votes were cast against a regional law put in place to financially support the bid for the Winter Olympic Games in 1998 ([Marco 2006](#)). However, it has to be noted that this outcome could have been influenced by the IOC's vote on the host, which was held before and was unsuccessful for the Aosta Valley ([Cress 1991](#)). Other examples took place in 1993 and 1997, when voters in Innsbruck did not support bids for the Winter Games in 2002 and 2006, respectively ([Maennig 2017](#)). [Chappelet \(2021\)](#) additionally mentions that citizens could vote on bids for Winter Olympic Games in Tarvisio (Italy) in 1994, in Poprad-Tatry (Slovakia) in 1997, in Zakopane (Poland) in 1997, in Klagenfurt (Austria) in 1997.

In 2011, a vote was held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen regarding Munich's bid for the Winter Olympics in 2018 ([Chappelet 2021](#)). Afterwards, three candidates for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games (Graubünden in Switzerland, Munich in Germany, and Krakow in Poland) withdrew after dismissive referenda ([Könecke et al. 2016](#); [Mackay 2013](#); [Shirinian 2014](#)). In Krakow, this happened even though the city had already handed in its bid. Oslo (Norway) also voted on bidding for 2022 and 55.1 percent of the voters were in favour ([Goddard 2013](#)). However, the Norwegian national government eventually decided not to back the bid and it was withdrawn ([Aalberg 2014](#)).

Furthermore, Vienna (Austria) voted against hosting the 2028 Olympics ([Crook 2013](#)) and voters in Hamburg (Germany) dismissed a bid for the Games in 2024. Interestingly, Hamburg had been chosen over Berlin as National Applicant City by Germany's National Olympic Committee mainly because market research on both cities' bidding ambitions had yielded more favorable results in Hamburg ([Könecke et al. 2016](#)).

In Paris (France), Rome (Italy), and Budapest (Hungary), the city councils had decided against holding referenda on their 2024 Olympic bids even though these had been requested in Budapest and Rome (cf. [Dampf 2016](#)). In Budapest the bid was eventually dropped without a referendum after a public petition in favour of one had been signed much more often than required ([Morgan 2017a](#); [Dampf 2016](#)). In Rome, the then newly elected mayor Virginia Raggi ended the city's bid after having voiced her strong opposition during the electoral campaign ([New York Times 2016](#)). Long before that, Boston had already dropped its bid for 2024 due to slipping political support which manifested in the 'refus[al] to cover cost overruns' ([Dampf 2016](#)). Eventually left with only two potential hosts, the IOC then decided rather spontaneously to include the Olympic Games 2028 in the bidding process

as well. Paris will now host the Games in 2024 and Los Angeles the ones in 2028 (Carroll and Melander 2017; International Olympic Committee 2017) and neither of these two very attractive potential hosts will be left empty-handed (Könecke and de Nooij 2017).

For the 2026 Winter Olympics, seven cities originally proclaimed their interest in hosting in the dialogue stage. One was dropped by the IOC due to infrastructure-related concerns (Erzurum, Turkey). Before even entering the dialogue stage, Innsbruck voted against hosting the event in 2017 (Morgan 2017b). Graz then developed an Austrian bid. However, after the communist party had collected enough signatures and the State government had approved a referendum, the bid was terminated without a referendum actually taking place (Butler 2018; Morgan 2018c). Two more dismissive referenda were held in Switzerland in Graubünden (Butler 2017) and Sion (Morgan 2018a), and another one in Canada (Calgary) (Morgan 2018b). One city (Sapporo in Japan) withdrew because of earthquake damages and planned another try for the 2030 Olympics (Morgan 2018d). In the end, again only two cities were left and the IOC choose Milan—Cortina d’Ampezzo (Italy) over Stockholm—Åre (Sweden) as host for 2026.

3.2. Olympic Referenda and Politicians’ Personal Legacies

In recent years, it seems to have become even more likely that the public is asked to vote on Olympic bid, and it has become very likely that the results are against bidding for or hosting the Games. Accordingly, the question arises how this development can influence politicians’ personal legacies. If a referendum is held, public figures from the sport world and beyond generally start promoting the bid, resulting in many joint appearances with local politicians. A mutual promotion strategy of political and other supporters of the bid is also likely. Thus, if a politician credibly supports the Olympic cause, personal networks within the sport world and beyond can be strengthened, regardless of the outcome of a referendum.

Particularly, if a referendum supports a bid, further legacy effects should result. For instance, the acquisition of (political and other) support becomes much easier and political opposition to the bid becomes less powerful. A favorable vote also constitutes an insurance against allegations of having taken a wrong decision when opting for the bid. Thus, a supportive referendum paves the way for strengthening the personal legacies from Olympic bidding processes depicted in Figure 1. Yet, as could be seen in the case of Oslo, a supportive referendum cannot guarantee that a bid will actually be maintained until the IOC’s final vote. Accordingly, even a supportive referendum is only a momentary success that could also prove to be a burden at a later stage. In the end, the decision against staging an Olympic Games can be transferred to the voters with a referendum at one specific point in time. However, the final decision for upholding a bid and/or staging the Games remains a political choice until the very end.

Since Olympic referenda are hard to win, a referendum can also constitute a rather convenient bail out option of an Olympic bid at comparably low political cost. Moreover, they can be employed as a tool to create legacies from a bid without actual ambition to stage the event. In that sense, a referendum can be attractive if a politician would like to drop a bid but cannot withdraw his support gracefully without a very good (external) reason. Such an ambition could have numerous reasons. For instance, a bid could have been ‘inherited’ from a predecessor (possibly from another political party), a politician might not want to openly oppose major sport organizations’ pressure to bid, or the desired personal legacy from the bidding process might already have been attained. However, due to the political commitment that has been accumulated, it can be very hard to stop policy proposals if they are somewhat advanced (Mackie and Preston 1998). In the case of an Olympic bid this could particularly be the case if popular sport organizations and their members and stakeholders have shown a high commitment to the bid and would be upset by or even fight political opposition. This means that a politician—particularly one from a party that has previously supported the bid—would risk losing considerable potential to positively activate networks and other legacies built with this group if s/he suddenly

openly opposed the bid. A failed referendum or—as Budapest or Graz have shown—even the threat of having to stage a referendum that is likely to fail can thus serve as an ‘excuse’ for stopping a bid without having to openly oppose it and should enable the concerned politicians to maintain (at least some of) the positive potential of the acquired legacies. This means that referenda enable politicians to end bids without openly opposing them, while still being able to create personal legacies from them.

In addition to simply influencing the legacies stemming from an Olympic bid, referenda can also create legacies of their own, which is why they are included in Figure 3 alongside the declaration of interest and the bidding process. In this context, it has to be considered that having voters decide on an Olympic bid usually is not a very risky choice for a politician if compared to other political issues. Olympic bids are highly emotional topics experiencing considerable media attention that give them an air of fundamental importance. However, they do not influence the regular life of most voters or the general political landscape too much if they are dismissed during the bidding phase. Thus, a defeat in an Olympic referendum should be considerably less harmful to a politician’s career than a defeat regarding a central political topic that s/he promotes. This can be expected because the long-term effects of a failed referendum on a bid would be considerably less present than it would be the case after a failed referendum on an everyday matter. An example could be a failed referendum on increased subsidies for public transportation to prevent higher prices. Such a failed referendum would be perceivable for everybody who uses public transportation because it becomes more expensive. Many voters would be confronted with such an outcome (almost) every day.

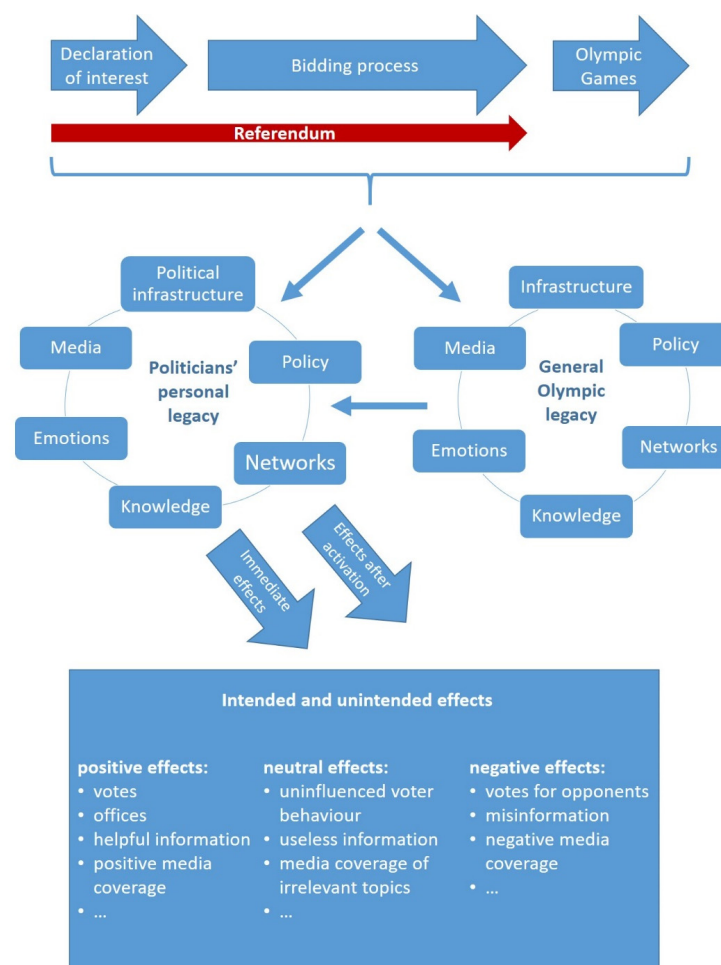


Figure 3. Sources and effects of politicians’ personal legacies from Olympic bidding processes, Olympic referenda, and Games.

Vice versa, the careers of politicians opposing an Olympic bid should also not be strained too much after a successful referendum. One reason for this is that the actual effect of this outcome would only be felt much later, and nobody could tell for quite some time if it would not have actually been better to withdraw the bid until then. Moreover, opponents of a bid that have supported a referendum can claim that one of their motivations was to give the general population a voice in the process, which will generally be appreciated by many in Western democracies. This means that referenda have the potential to create legacies not only for supporters but also for opponents of Olympic bids at comparably low political costs. This aspect could be one of the explanations for the popularity this instrument has gained in democratic countries in recent years.

In terms of the overview presented in Figure 3, legacies from referenda can primarily be created in terms of emotions (it is a highly emotional topic for supporters and adversaries alike) and networks (because networks will form around those politicians who support and around those who oppose a bid). As has just been described regarding politicians who have opposed a bid, referenda on Olympic bids generally constitute an opportunity for politicians to position themselves as ‘firm democrats’ who ask for the voters’ opinion on a—seemingly—important matter. This is particularly true in countries where referenda are not mandatory or common. In turn, if politicians deny a referendum, they run the risk of being perceived as ‘undemocratic’ even though this denial might be the result of the designated democratic procedure.

Due to the actually rather low importance of the matter, a referendum on an Olympic Games—especially a failed one—can also serve as a ‘pressure valve’. It can give unsatisfied voter groups an opportunity to voice their dissatisfaction without severe consequences for the involved office holders. By publicly opposing an Olympic bid and/or voting against it, dissatisfied voters and/or interest groups can gain a victory of high symbolic value without greatly influencing major political decisions or political careers. Like this, another type of emotional legacy results as it can be expected that tensions with disgruntled voters should be reduced for some time. As has already explained before, this reasoning is also applicable to ‘policy’ because other political initiatives could profit from the focus that is put on an Olympic referendum. This is why referenda have a high potential to also create policy-legacies.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Many politicians in Western democracies still openly advocate bidding for Olympic Games. However, large parts of the general public do not seem to support staging the event (anymore) and almost all of the rather frequent—and often non-mandatory—referenda on the matter failed. However, given that senior politicians usually are in a position to decide upon these matters, supporting such an endeavor cannot be considered a mere beginner’s fault. Rather contrarily, good knowledge of and consequently rational actions within the political system are necessary for the relevant officeholders to have attained their positions. Following rational choice theory, they therefore have to weigh potential personal gains (opportunities) and costs (risks). Against this backdrop, the ambition of this paper was to show that politicians can obtain personal legacies from bidding for and hosting Olympic Games and also from related referenda regardless of the success of these endeavors. By doing so, the study has yielded contributions in three fields by (a) contributing to the research on the Olympic bidding process, (b) broadening the scientific perspective on (individual) legacies of mega sport events, and (c) providing a new perspective on Olympic referenda and their recent popularity.

The analysis started by first outlining the different personal legacies that can result from bidding for and staging Olympic Games. As could be seen, these legacies mostly fall in the ‘classical’ categories networks, knowledge, emotions, and (political) infrastructure. Furthermore, it was explained why media was included not only as politicians’ personal legacy but also as a general legacy in Figure 1. Regarding referenda, it was shown that these have the potential to strengthen personal legacies from the bidding process and to

even create legacies themselves. Particularly emotions and policy are individual legacies that should result when referenda are conducted. For opponents of an Olympic bid, the legacy potential of referenda should be especially attractive because it enables them to strongly partake in the legacy creation of the bidding process. Without referendum, their potential to obtain personal legacies should be considerably smaller.

Like all legacies of mega sport events, personal legacies have the potential to create positive, negative, or neutral effects (Figure 3). Since legacies can be latent, personal legacies often have to be activated in order to create an effect for a politician. However, personal legacies—particularly those of political opponents—can also be leveraged to create unfavorable effects. An example is leveraging the knowledge about an opponent's involvement in an unpopular Olympic bid during an electoral campaign to discredit him/her with the voters.

Generally, many of the thoughts described in this paper should also be applicable to other mega sport events (e.g., the football World Cup or other international competitions) and their bidding processes or other types of events (e.g., large cultural and/or business events like the World Expo). This is especially so because it is not carved in stone that the public will not also be asked to vote on the football World Cup or many other (non-)sport events in the future. If this should happen, some of the aspects described in this paper could turn out to have contributed to this development. Due to this and to the outstanding worldwide attention Olympic Games create, the fact that they usually take place in only one region, and since referenda are now somewhat common in Olympic bids, this event seemed to be especially fruitful for this analysis, even though some limitations will be pointed out hereafter.

First, this study's focus is on individual politicians, which is why some relevant aspects have not been covered but should be scrutinized in the future. For example, a more detailed analysis of how other groups can partake in the legacy-potentials of the bids and the events and what this means for their assessment of incurred risks and opportunities would be informative. This is obviously relevant since—among many other types of legacy creation or activation—'[c]itizens may take the opportunity to attract the attention of a worldwide audience to their social needs, for example by holding protest marches' (Preuss 2015, p. 660).

Despite an Olympic bid's currently very slim chances of outlasting a public vote, it turned out that holding a referendum could often be a rational choice for senior politicians. This is so because such referenda should usually be considerably less risky than many other political projects. This consideration even holds true regardless of the actual preferences of the concerned politician(s) regarding the Games. It can even be more attractive for supporters of a bid to stage a referendum and lose than to uphold the bid without one. Furthermore, particularly opponents of a bid can obtain considerable personal legacies from referenda, which should be another major reason for their recent popularity. Thus, it can be expected that referenda in Olympic bidding processes will remain a common phenomenon in Western societies in the future. Considering that the latest developments in the awarding process should considerably diminish the number of bidding processes for Olympic Games in the years to come (see also further down), the assumption that referenda could also be held on other (sport) events does not seem far-fetched. Particularly not if their potential to create personal legacies for politicians (and also other groups) is taken into account.

As has become clear in this paper, it can be expected that politicians promoting a bid will usually have personal strategies for managing the risks and making use of the opportunities resulting from the possible outcomes of the bid (successful or unsuccessful referendum, bid is stopped because of political concerns, bid is eventually successful or unsuccessful). If this is initially not the case, such a strategy will certainly be developed during the process and at the latest as soon as strong opposition becomes apparent (which currently is almost certain). When considering their options for such a strategy, politicians will (have to) concern themselves with many aspects that have been discussed in this paper.

However, these aspects are not only relevant for politicians but also for a number of other actors. Clearly, sport organizations such as National Olympic Committees, also have to assess the risks and opportunities resulting from their involvement in an Olympic bid. Due to what has been addressed in this paper, it is obvious that one of the risks they have to manage is the personal strategies of the involved political actors. Depending on the organizations' main interests and aims, a number of 'counterstrategies' can be suitable to safeguard their interests to prevent that politicians are primarily interested in their own advantages or abandon the bid for their own good. For example, sport organizations might try to strengthen the personal commitment of the most relevant politicians in order to decrease these politicians' potential profits—i.e., to increase the politicians' risks—if the bid fails at an early stage. Sport organizations also will have to make staging Olympic Games and other sport events much more attractive for local stakeholders (citizens and taxpayers) (Könecke et al. 2016). The introduction of Agenda 2020 and other changes regarding the Olympic Games and the bidding process that the IOC has implemented in recent years might be steps in this direction. However, the discussions about scandals and shortcomings related to the IOC and the Olympic Games profoundly undermine these efforts. Long jail sentences for corruption linked to the Games in Rio (Savarese 2021) or the Russian doping scandal (e.g., France 24 2020) are just two exemplary issues that can be mentioned here.

The fact that—regardless of their outcome—referenda cannot only be beneficial for political supporters of a bid but also for adversaries is problematic as well. But it could potentially also be advantageous for sport organizations. This is so because potential political supporters are in the comfortable situation to be able to show initial support on the condition that a referendum is held. And also political opponents of a bid should generally look forward to a referendum and its potential to create personal legacies. This insight could be helpful when 'selling' a bid to them. But even if this could make the initiation of a bid more attractive to politicians, sport organizations still have to find good answers to the question of how to convince the public that bidding for and organizing an Olympic Games is an idea worth supporting in a referendum. This again shows that further analyses of risks and opportunities of other stakeholders involved in bidding processes for mega sport events, such as sport organizations, are a very worthy field of research.

It should also not be forgotten that many of the ideas and observations described in this paper are not only applicable to politicians on the local or regional level. They can, for instance, also be extended to national politics. Interesting examples to look at in this context could be Tony Blair (Prime Minister during the successful bid for the Olympics 2012 held in London), Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazilian president when Rio de Janeiro won the bid for the Games in 2016, who recently regained the presidency), or Emanuel Macron (French president when Paris was awarded the Games in 2024). Moreover, the ideas brought forward in this paper are also applicable to non-politicians who are linked to or involved in a bid. An example thereof are the careers of the two co-heads of the Albertville 1992 Winter Olympic Games. Michel Barnier moved on to become a member of the French cabinet less than a year after the Games and eventually became the European Union's lead negotiator with Great Britain after the Brexit vote. His co-head, Jean-Claude Killy, eventually headed the IOC's Coordination Commissions for the Winter Olympic Games in Turin (2006) and Sochi (2014) (Butler 2016b). It can be assumed that they have made use of (some of) the legacies they have acquired through their involvement in the bid and the Games to further their careers.

It is also worth noting that the IOC has reacted to some of the developments that have been scrutinized in this paper. One example are the changes in the bidding rules based on which Brisbane was announced as host city for the Olympic Games 2031 already on 21 July 2021. This was two days before the 2020 Summer Olympics and much earlier than in the past. Moreover, the decision was made much faster than in previous bidding processes (International Olympic Committee 2021). This development disappointed many other potential hosts but solved some of the problems that have been addressed in this paper. However, it also gives even more power to politicians and other interest groups in

the selected host regions as legacies can now be built over longer periods of time, which should lower the risks and increase the opportunities they incur. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that referenda still remain a threat even after the Games have been awarded. As has been shown, they can constitute a convenient bail-out option, which might have the effect that hosts refuse to stage the Games even (long) after they have been awarded to them (as it has been the case in Denver). This, again, shows that risk management regarding mega sport events will be an important topic in research and practice for some time to come.

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Note

- ¹ A referendum can generally be understood as a free, fair, and competitive vote (Rose 2015), which is why we use this expression to describe all types of democratic public voting procedures on Olympic bids and Olympic Games.

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