

**A Tale of Two Mayors: Dave Bing, Kevin Johnson, and the Rise of  
Athletes-Turned-Politicians**

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A.M., Brown University, 2010

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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## Academic Background

*Brown University* – Providence, RI

- Masters in Political Science (2010)
- Passed Comprehensive Exams in both American Politics and Political Theory (2010)

*Weber State University* – Ogden, UT

- B.S. in Political Science with a Minor in History (1995)

*Cornell University* – Ithaca, NY

- Significant undergraduate coursework undertaken at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the College of Arts and Sciences (1986-1989)

## Employment Background in Education

### **Doctoral Fellow**

*Brown University* – Department of Political Science, Providence, RI; 2008-2013

I am currently a PhD candidate at Brown University in Political Science, attending as a result of winning a fully-funded doctoral fellowship. Areas of academic interest include American Political Development, Celebrity Politics and Elections, Urban Politics, Political Communication, International Diplomacy, U.S. Foreign Policy, Political Theory, and Race/Identity Politics. My graduate school experience has included the following elements:

- Teaching assistantships (TA) in several courses, including: City Politics, Mass Media and Politics, and Theories of International Relations.
- Guest instructor for Brown University courses, including: Global Security after the Cold War, Intelligence and Economic Espionage, Crisis Management, and Negotiation, Mediation, and Arbitration.

### **Lead Instructor, Program Dean, and Chief Operating Officer**

*Yale University* – Ivy Scholars Program – International Security Studies and the Office of International Affairs, New Haven, CT; 2001-2012

For over a decade I served in a variety of instructional and leadership roles for Yale University's Ivy Scholar Program, a university administered initiative targeted at talented and gifted high school students, providing integrated instruction in Political Thought, History, Law, Economics, Critical Thinking, and Group Writing and Presentation Skills.

- Responsibilities included curriculum design and implementation, significant teaching across a broad range of seminars and lectures, domestic and international student outreach and recruitment, cultivation of potential donors, responsibility for a six-figure financial aid program, compliance with human resources and diversity standards, as well as the training and supervision of a staff of over two dozen instructors.
- During my tenure as Program Dean and Chief Operating Officer, the Ivy Scholars Program experienced tremendous growth; adding programs in American Political Thought and Global Leadership, growing to almost three hundred students from nearly thirty nations, producing revenues in excess of one million dollars a year.

## **Teacher**

### ***The College Preparatory School, Oakland, CA; 2000 – 2008***

For eight years I taught at CPS, which was ranked the #6 high school in the United States by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2007. This multifaceted position involved curriculum design, academic advising, classroom teaching, competition coaching, student supervision, and program administration. The full time, private school position involved the following:

- Courses taught included Introduction to Philosophy, Introduction to Speech and Debate, Intermediate Debate, and Advanced Debate.
- Work with the national championship debate team included instruction in argumentation theory, note-taking, critical reading and listening, audience analysis, public speaking, and advanced research methods.

## **Assistant Dean**

### ***Hopkins High School, Minnetonka, MN; 1999 – 2000***

This full time public school administrative position involved the following elements:

- Working with students and staff on conflict resolution and mediation, investigating violations of institutional rules and identifying and implementing consequences in accordance with school district policy.
- Maintaining consistent written and verbal communication between parents, teachers, and students. Working with counselors, diversity coordinators, and special education instructors to facilitate a constructive learning environment and maintain compliance with institutional standards, including IEP's.

## **Lecturer and Assistant Director of Forensics**

### ***Weber State University, Ogden, UT; 1995 – 1996***

Upon completing my undergraduate degree, my alma mater offered me a one year full time faculty appointment as a Lecturer and Assistant Director of Forensics in the Department of Communication. Responsibilities included the following:

- Developed and taught multiple sections of both Introduction to Public Speaking and Intercollegiate Forensics.
- Coached a nationally competitive policy and parliamentary debate program, which involved instruction across a wide variety of skill levels, assistance in advanced research methods, and an extensive coaching and travel schedule.

## **Papers and Publications**

Coburn-Palo, Nicholas, "The Past, Present, and Future of America's Relationship with the Koreas," Paper presented at the International Security Studies Colloquium at Yale University, 2010.

## **Presentations, Conferences, and Workshops (2010-present)**

### ***Featured Presenter – African Union/United Nations (UNITAR) – March 2012***

Developed and presented curriculum at an ambassador level training workshop entitled "Consultations & Capacity Building Training for the African Union Negotiators to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)" at the African Union Mission to the United Nations in New York.

### ***Trainer/Facilitator – The Stevenson School – February 2012***

Worked as part of a consulting team conducting diversity and team-building training for the faculty and staff of The Stevenson School, a residential private school in Pebble Beach, CA.

***Facilitator – Yale University/Brady-Johnson Center for Grand Strategy – December 2011***

Assisted in the design and facilitation of a political crisis management simulation for Yale’s elite “Studies in Grand Strategy” program. Collaborated with fellow facilitators including John Negroponte, Paul Kennedy, and former Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady.

***Instructor – United Nations (UNITAR) – November 2011***

Developed and presented curriculum at a workshop for U.N. diplomats from developing nations entitled “Effective Public Speaking and Presentation Skills” at the Egyptian Mission to the United Nations in New York.

***Instructor – United Nations (UNITAR)/Olaf Palme Fund – October 2011***

Developed and presented curriculum at a workshop for U.N. diplomats from developing nations entitled “Effective Negotiations in Multilateral Conferences” at the Malaysian Mission to the United Nations in New York.

***Instructor – Republic of South Africa/United Nations (UNITAR) – January 2011***

Developed and presented curriculum for the inaugural United Nations course on effective statement writing for incoming Security Council delegations, entitled “Introduction to Statement Writing for the United Nations Security Council,” for the South African delegation at their Mission in New York.

***Featured Presenter – Yale University/ International Security Studies – December 2010***

Presented a paper at the International Security Studies Colloquium hosted by Yale University on “The Past, Present, and Future of America’s Relationship with the Koreans.”

***Facilitator – Yale University/Brady-Johnson Center for Grand Strategy – December 2010***

Assisted in the design and facilitation of a political crisis management simulation for Yale’s elite “Studies in Grand Strategy” program. Collaborated with fellow facilitators including John Lewis Gaddis, Paul Kennedy, and former Ambassador Charles Hill.

***Instructor – United Nations (UNITAR)/Olaf Palme Fund – November 2010***

Developed and presented curriculum at a workshop for U.N. diplomats from developing nations entitled “Effective Negotiations in Multilateral Conferences” at the Malaysian Mission to the United Nations in New York.

***Instructor – United Nations (UNITAR)/Olaf Palme Fund – May 2010***

Developed and presented curriculum at a workshop for U.N. diplomats from developing nations entitled “Effective Negotiations in Multilateral Conferences” at Finland’s Mission to the United Nations in New York.

**Honors and Awards**

- Presented with the P. Terrence Hopmann prize for excellence in teaching by Brown University (2011)
- Served as Chairman of the National Forensic League’s National Rules and Review Committee for Policy Debate (2005)
- Presented with the Acolyte Award for being the top high school argumentation teacher/coach in the nation (2004)
- Coached high school debate team to a national title at the National Tournament of Champions (2003)
- Commencement Speaker, Weber State University (1995)
- Named Top Speaker at the NPDA Parliamentary Debate Collegiate National Championship Tournament (1995)

## **Acknowledgements**

As is often the case, there were numerous persons and organizations which were essential to this dissertation having been completed. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Brown University, and the Department of Political Science in particular, for taking a chance on offering full funding to a non-traditional graduate student, affording me the opportunity to achieve a lifelong dream.

To my committee I owe an even greater debt. Prof. Corey Brettschneider was generous with his time and willingness to work with me on a project not entirely within his wheelhouse. Prof. Pauline Jones-Luong, a long-time mentor and friend, offered invaluable advice and support throughout the project. I would not be at the finish line now but for her considerable efforts. Finally, this project simply could not have been completed without the extraordinary guidance and patience of my Advisor, Prof. James Morone. He has served as an inspiring exemplar of what it means to simultaneously be an exceptional creator of knowledge, adviser, and teacher. This impressive group of scholars deserves enormous credit for their assistance in transforming this project into something of potential use to future researchers. They deserve no blame whatsoever for any deficiencies associated with my work. My gratitude to them will be unending.

There was also a group of young scholars, among my cohort and otherwise, who were instrumental in informing my thinking throughout the dissertation project. To name just a few, I'd like to thank Elizabeth Bennett, Anthony Berryhill, Jennie Ikuta, and Matt Lyddon. There were other great souls who were there as bulwarks of support when the process was not proceeding as well as I had hoped. The kind of people any and everyone are lucky to have in their lives. I am especially grateful to Stephen Willow, Steve Clemmons, Thomas Crowshaw, Ben Falk, Kate Noveau, Sandy Spaulding, Anne Marie Todd, and – most of all – my fiancé Carolyn O'Neill. In addition, as a student who returned to graduate school later in life, there have been influences that have been immensely important to my development as a scholar and a person; such persons include Will Baker, Jeff Bile, Mike Bryant, Judy Butler, Lexy Green, Bill Shanahan, and Tracy Weitz.

There are also certain other individuals who I would be horribly remiss in not acknowledging as having been essential to this project having been brought to fruition; most fundamentally, my family. In particular, my Mother (Carol Palo) and my Sister (April Sobetzki); they have been the cornerstone of everything I have accomplished in life, emphatically including the completion of this project. My grandparents, Mac and Rita Heitlinger, who bravely came to the United States and imbued our family with a love of knowledge and the written word, have always been a powerful source of inspiration to me. Finally, it is to my greatest mentor and friend, Dr. Minh A. Luong, that this project is dedicated. His sense of honor and loyalty, emotional and strategic intellect, and commitment to excellence have served as a beacon for which I've striven for decades. His guidance and friendship have been a priceless gift.

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## CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCING SPORTS AND POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES

In late 2008, the world was captivated as Barack Obama won election as the first African-American President of the United States. The significance of that accomplishment deservedly eclipsed any other race in that election cycle. Somewhat lost in that moment, however, was the election of two other African-American politicians to an admittedly less significant office, that of mayor. With their victories, occurring within months of each other, Dave Bing and Kevin Johnson became the first athletes-turned-politicians to have ever become mayor of a major American city. For most academics, a connection between sports and politics seems, in itself, counterintuitive. Politics is about the clash of ideas, or about choosing rational policy options, or about power and institutional competition. Sports would seem unlikely to figure into such a framework. To the extent that an athlete-turned-politician *ever* wins election to public office, it constitutes a puzzling outcome.

Bing and Johnson, in winning mayoral elections in Detroit and Sacramento, represent a particular type of celebrity politician, the athlete-turned-politician, in a world increasingly captivated by celebrity and spectacle. Moreover, the scant political science literature available on athletes-turned-politicians would predict poor job performance from these political amateurs. The performances of Bing and Johnson, however, defy such a monochromatic description. In studying these two cases, I believe much can be

learned about the interaction between celebrity, sport, and politics in our increasingly media saturated culture.

## **Introducing the Cases**

In considering the cases of these two mayors, the similarities and distinctiveness of their experiences begin to demonstrate the expansiveness of the concept of the athlete-turned-politician, hinting at how diverse the broader concept of celebrity politics might be properly construed. Although both cases will be considered in depth in future chapters, the value of these cases is discernible with even a cursory look at how these candidates won elective office.

### ***Dave Bing, Mayor of Detroit Michigan***

Born in 1943, Dave Bing grew up poor, sleeping two-to-a-bed with his siblings, in the Greenwood section of Washington D.C., where he was boyhood friends with later Motown singer Marvin Gaye. His father, a hardscrabble construction worker, managed to keep the family afloat. When he was five years old, a horrible accident caused a nail to pierce his left eye. Because his family lacked health insurance, he couldn't have the necessary operation to restore his vision. As a result, his vision was left permanently blurred in the injured eye. Despite this he became a high school basketball star, earning a full scholarship to a major university.

In 1962 Bing enrolled at Syracuse University. He was a college All-American at Syracuse, and was drafted 2<sup>nd</sup> overall in the first round of the NBA draft by the Detroit Pistons. Such an accomplishment was truly amazing, given the damage to his left eye. Teammates would later claim they had to work their way toward his right side when on a fast break or he would literally be unable to see them. Despite such a handicap, and

future significant retinal damage to his other eye, Bing went on to win the NBA Rookie of the Year award and become a seven time NBA All-Star. Ultimately, Dave Bing was named one of the 50 greatest players of all time at the NBA's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary event, as well as being selected to the National Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, MA.

While playing in the NBA, Bing had worked during the off-season to hone his business acumen, at either the National Bank of Detroit or for Chrysler. In the 1980s he founded Bing Steel, which, in its first year earned annual sales of approximately \$60 million, immediately establishing it as one the largest black-owned industrial companies in the nation. Over time, Bing grew his interests into the diverse Bing Group, expanding into areas such as auto supplies. The Bing Group, which employs 500 people, has earned as much as \$300 million a year in revenues. He also has been prominently involved in local real estate and development projects.

A local icon due to his nine years playing for the Detroit Piston, the 65 year old Bing entered the mayoral race as a resident of the Detroit metropolitan area for over forty years. As he entered the race, it was to be the first political campaign of his life. However, given his successes, one might well question why Bing would want the job. The problems confronting Detroit would be daunting to even the most experienced leader.

For openers, the next leader would be following in the footsteps of Kwame Kilpatrick, who had resigned from office in disgrace in September of 2008. As if the national black-eye given to Detroit by media coverage of the scandal was not bad enough, the economic condition of the city was far worse. The city was \$300 million in debt, its unemployment rate was estimated at between 22%-28%, and General Motors

appeared to be on the brink of collapse. Municipal services were in shambles throughout the city. The grimness of the situation did not appear to deter Bing. In fact, Bing claimed the dire circumstances explained why he was running for Mayor.

Bing announced he would compete in the February 2009 special election, which would produce two candidates for a runoff election that May. He was a political novice and, as even his friends conceded, not terribly charismatic, nor a good public speaker. Bing ended up winning that special election with 29% of the vote over interim mayor Kenneth Cockrel, who received 27% of the vote. The two would face off again in two months.

Although both ran as Democrats, in many respects, Cockrel was well positioned as Bing's opposite number. He was young; only 43 years old. The son of a well-known activist lawyer, Cockrel worked as a local newspaper reporter before becoming the youngest elected council member in the history of Detroit, when he won his seat in 1997. He assumed the title of interim mayor after Kilpatrick submitted his resignation. Cockrel ran an aggressive campaign against Bing, accusing him of being a carpetbagger; living, until recently, in the wealthy suburb of Franklin, where his wife still resided. Bing's image also suffered some damage from apparent misstatements about his educational background.

Bing, a political novice, unsurprisingly campaigned as a political outsider. Detroit had not elected a political novice as mayor since 1890 and never in the city's 300-plus year history had someone who moved from the suburbs specifically to run for office been elected mayor. Financially secure and well respected in the Detroit community, Bing argued he could have no possible motive to run at this point in his life other than a

genuine desire to help his adopted city get through its darkest hour. He robustly criticized the City Council, calling them “clowns” and declaring them an embarrassment.

About a week before the May runoff election, Cockrel enjoyed a small lead in the polls. A *Detroit News*/WXYZ-TV poll showed Cockrel with a 39%-33% lead over Bing. However, the *Detroit Free Press*, as well as Rev. Jesse Jackson, endorsed Bing in the closing days of the campaign. Those endorsements may have swung the balance, as Bing prevailed over Cockrel by a slender 52%-48% margin.

***Kevin Johnson, Mayor of Sacramento, California***

Born in 1966, Kevin Johnson grew up in the predominantly black Oak Park neighborhood of Sacramento, CA. His father, Lawrence, who had recently returned from an eighteen month tour of duty in the military, drowned in an accident on a fishing trip when Kevin was only three. His mother, Georgia West, was only sixteen when she had become pregnant with Kevin. As a result, his grandparents played a significant role in his upbringing. Johnson grew up to become a Sacramento prep sports legend in baseball and basketball. While playing point guard, Johnson led the state in scoring in 1983, with an average of 32.5 points per game. In 2012, he was inducted into the National High School Hall of Fame in Nashville Tennessee.

In 1983 he entered the University of California at Berkeley on an athletic scholarship. As a baseball player, he was outstanding; good enough to play minor league professional baseball while still in college and promising enough of a prospect to be drafted in the 12<sup>th</sup> round of the Major League Baseball draft by the local Oakland Athletics. However, it was in basketball where his star shone most brightly. Twice, he was named to the all-conference team for Cal and he was drafted into the NBA, where he

was a multiple time all-star during his thirteen year career, most of which was spent with the Phoenix Suns.

In 1989 he founded St. Hope Academy, which ultimately functioned as an umbrella organization for several charter schools, including St. Hope High School, Johnson's alma mater. As years passed, the reputation of the schools steadily grew, with numerous alumni matriculating to elite colleges. After Johnson's retirement, he founded a self-titled real estate and business development company, the Kevin Johnson Corp., in Sacramento, binding him even more closely to his hometown. He also became much more prominently involved in the operations of St. Hope Academy.

In 2008, Johnson decided to run for mayor of Sacramento, attempting to become the first African-American to win election to the office. Johnson traced the roots of his political awakening to hearing a speech by Senator Bill Bradley in 1996, at Madison Square Garden, identifying himself as politically left-of-center. In seeking the office of mayor, Johnson would be taking on a multi-term incumbent, Heather Fargo. She enjoyed the unanimous endorsement of the City Council, as well as the powerful Democratic Party. Fargo's low key managerial style, as well as strong working relationships with both city and state workers - an important dynamic in the capital city of Sacramento - had allowed her to avoid controversy. Johnson's reform-oriented, end business-as-usual campaign, resulted in an unusually negative campaign. Allegations of statutory rape from early in his NBA career, supposedly resulting in an out-of-court settlement, surfaced during the campaign. His tenure at St. Hope also was scrutinized, with allegations of financial and other improprieties being the source of numerous articles in the local newspaper, the *Sacramento Bee*.

In the early days of his campaign, Johnson played strongly on his sports background, especially in recruiting volunteers on college campuses. Johnson has claimed that his sports background was highly beneficial regarding his political abilities, claiming that numerous positive traits in sports are transferable to politics. He cited the discipline and focus necessary for success in sports, as well the unique leadership skills required by a point guard in basketball, as significant. Furthermore, Johnson claimed that traveling to 28 major cities annually, for over a decade, gave him a useful perspective on city life and urban planning.

Johnson was actively supported by current and former NBA stars during the campaign, including Shaquille O'Neal, Magic Johnson, and Charles Barkley. His campaign also sought the advice of former college and pro basketball star, Bill Bradley. Johnson's campaign was supported not only by NBA stars, but by rising stars of a different sort: young, black mayors. Newark Mayor Cory Booker and his supporters made calls to funders on Johnson's behalf, to assist him in building a campaign war chest. D. C. Mayor Adrian Fenty held fundraisers for Johnson, as well as allowing a top official, John Falcicchio, to go on leave to work for the Johnson campaign.

Neither Johnson nor Fargo could score the necessary 50% of votes to avoid a runoff. The negative campaign appeared to have turned-off Sacramento voters; fewer than 25% of registered voters had cast ballots. When the runoff election occurred in November, Johnson won handily, with 57% of the vote.

### **The Convergence of Celebrity, Politics, and Spectator Sports**

In order to develop a theory explaining when, why, and how athletes-turned-politicians are elected to office, we should consider both how celebrity has functioned in

mass-media influenced politics, as well as the evolving role spectator sports have played in American politics. This second issue, given that it has been almost entirely unexamined by the political science community, will be initially addressed in this section. Alongside the rise of celebrity politics throughout the twentieth century, I contend that sports has played a surprisingly significant role in the United States, both reflecting and constituting politics.

Sidney Milkis indirectly offers a starting point for celebrity politics in his 2009 book *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy*. According to Milkis, around the turn of the twentieth century, presidential campaigns began to assume a different form, focusing more on individual candidates, rather than party affiliation. (Milkis 2009) Beginning with the revival-like campaigns of William Jennings Bryan and continuing with Theodore Roosevelt's audacious campaign strategy in running for reelection, candidates began to highlight their own beliefs, traits, and accomplishments, eclipsing focus on party ideology and loyalty in their approaches to campaigning. Indeed, Teddy Roosevelt, the fabled big game hunter and war hero, was the first presidential candidate to accept his party nomination in person, on the floor of the convention, when he did so with the Progressive Party in 1912.

Interestingly, the first significant interaction between sports and politics also involved President Theodore Roosevelt, who very publically called for reform in college football, during a time when the scandalous level of violence was sparking calls for a national ban on the sport. (Swanson 2011) Roosevelt joined industrialist J.P. Morgan in arguing that "organized athletics could be the means for instilling the character and values necessary to make America a global power in the century to come. Sports could



breed a sense of hard work, self-discipline, and the win-at-all-cost ethic of competition.” (Zirin 2005; 18) Those lofty aspirations for sports were not remotely close to matching the reality of that time. One of the most popular sports of the era was boxing, which, at that time, was a bare knuckle affair where fights went on until somebody was literally knocked out. Once boxing introduced gloves, the spotlight of the sport was held by African-American heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, who was a controversial and divisive figure. (hooks 1994) Baseball was chock full of characters such as Ty Cobb, who – although talented – would be no reasonable persons idea of a role model. This uncouth period can be considered to come to an end during the 1920s, when the “Black Sox” baseball gambling scandal involving the 1919 World Series sparked a national uproar, prompting a crackdown on criminal activity across professional sports. Sports were obviously limited in its ability to engage large audiences by the media of the era, which included regular newspaper coverage, but no live play-by-play coverage.

With advances in radio broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s, both athletes and politicians became accessible to Americans as never before. As West and Orman explained, “[f]or the first time in American history, radio offered famous individuals an opportunity to communicate with the general public in ways that were both personal and intimate,” functioning as an ideal “media for a celebrity-oriented political system.” (West and Orman 2003; 7-8) This tool was grasped firmly and effectively by charismatic politicians such as Father Coughlin and Huey Long, who offered jeremiads against immorality, paired with populist laced prescriptions. The famed aviation adventurer, Charles Lindbergh, used the medium to push his isolationist opposition to U.S. entry into World War II, as well as earn him mention on numerous occasions as a potential

Presidential candidate. President Franklin Roosevelt, however, seemingly mastered the medium, using radio to bring his fireside chats into the living rooms of millions of Americans.

The post WWI generation of baseball athletes – Babe Ruth, Walter Johnson, Hank Greenberg, Lou Gehrig, and others – helped the sport establish a firm grip on the heart of the American sporting public. So ensconced was the sport by WWII that Babe Ruth’s name was reportedly used as a password answer at military checkpoints. Baseball’s popularity only accelerated as a great New York City rivalry between the Dodgers, Giants, and Yankees captivated fans for decades in the years following World War II. Americans across the nation gathered around radios, and eventually televisions, to cheer the exploits of Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, and Duke Snider. Boxing, now better regulated and relatively safer, also enjoyed a burst in popularity.

Although black Americans may have enjoyed bonding social capital when Joe Louis emerged victorious in heavyweight championship fights against white fighters, America enjoyed an undeniably bridging moment as they cheered Louis to victory in his rematch against Hitler’s champion, Max Schmeling. Similarly, Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the race barrier in Major League Baseball, and the struggles faced by other black players who followed, impacted how Americans thought about race more broadly. A recently published biography of baseball great Willie Mays recounted an especially poignant story, about a little league game in Texas during the Jim Crow era where the white grandson of a Ku Klux Klan member made a great catch in the outfield and shouted triumphantly to his family, “Look at me! I’m Willie Mays.” (Hirsch 2010)

Other sports, such as Track and Field, also enjoyed especially high popularity during this era, sometimes taking on Cold War era overtones, especially in highly publicized dual meets against the U.S.S.R and during the Olympics. When athletes did weigh in on politics during this era, it was almost always to speak of the importance of citizenship and loyalty to one's nation. (Zirin 2005)

Darrell West identifies the mid-1960s as the beginning of celebrity politics. Noting the rising influence of media figures in electoral politics, West specifically identifies former actor (and sports broadcaster) Ronald Reagan's election to Governor in California in 1966, as well as the televised Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate, as transformative events. (West and Orman 2003) The 1960s is also regarded as the time where pro football began its rise as a major professional sport. The rise of television unquestionably hastened the popularity of professional sports generally, but football particularly so. Although the first U.S. sports television broadcast can be traced back to 1939, oddly professional football was at first a reluctant convert to significant television coverage. Many owners feared it would cut against stadium ticket revenues, which were a far more lucrative income stream at the time. (Guttmann 1986; 137) It was not until the 1960s that NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle was finally able to convince team owners to enthusiastically embrace the potential of television. (Powers 1984) Largely as a result of that decision, the NFL now stands at the top of the pro-sports financial hierarchy, taking in \$6.2 billion in revenues in 2007 alone. (Rader 2009; 322)

As was the case throughout American society during the 1960s and 1970s, sports increasingly featured young athletes who openly advocated anti-establishment positions and felt compelled to criticize government policy. Athletes who spoke out on issues such

as race and the Vietnam War included Jim Brown, Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali), Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), Bill Walton, and Arthur Ashe. The 1968 Mexico City Olympics featured medal winning U.S. athletes replacing the traditional hand-over-heart salute during the playing of the national anthem with a defiant black power salute. (West and Orman 2003; 86) Of course, not all athletes adopted such an anti-establishment approach, as when Wilt Chamberlain endorsed the campaign of Richard Nixon for President. This internal fissure in the world of sports mirrored, perhaps even influenced, that of American society writ large.

As the 1980s dawned, sports provided a balm for the national humiliation of the hostage crisis in Iran in 1979. The shocking victory by the all-amateur U.S. men's hockey team at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics, which included an upset over the heavily favored Soviet team, was dubbed "The Miracle on Ice." Those years saw the elevation of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency of the United States, as well as the launch of ESPN as a national cable television channel. As Carter explained, ESPN began "with a modest penetration of 1.5 million homes...[G]rowing to almost 99 million homes, ESPN not only changed how we watched sports but also fundamentally changed how we consume sports, due to its wide range of content and distribution channels." (Carter 2011; 4) In recent years, serious fans have sports viewing options well beyond the ESPN and Fox Sports networks. For example, "satellite networks like Dish Network and Direct TV offer an amazing array of premium sports programming, such as NFL Sunday Ticket, MLB Extra Innings, NBA League Pass, NHL Center Ice, ESPN Full Court: College Basketball...English Premier League, and the like" (Bryant and Holt 2006; 39-40) which make well over a thousand sporting events available for home viewing each year. The

pervasive influence of sports television programming extends well beyond the United States. As Markovits and Rensmann point out, “Sporting events are far and away the most watched television programs in the world...more than two billion of the world’s population watch[ed] the final match [of the 2006 soccer World Cup] alone... Billions watched the sensational feats of Michael Phelps in the pool and Usain Bolt on the track.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 3)

Beyond television, spectator sports have enjoyed an especially good fit with the emergence of the internet as a source of information and entertainment. As Carter noted, “...the internet boom of the late 1990s forever changed the way fans consumed and played sports. In addition to delivering more timely news, information, and statistics to rabid fans, the Internet also provided the ultimate framework for sports junkies to participate in sports, given the Internet’s ability to efficiently aggregate what was once a modest, low-revenue undertaking: fantasy sports leagues...With estimates suggesting that as many as twenty-seven million American adults play fantasy sports, major television networks, including ESPN, have created television programming (including pay-per-view events) and website content specifically targeting these online players.” (Carter 2011; 8)

With the ability of the consumer to more fully control their sports experience, the experience of sports spectatorship is fundamentally altered. Real notes that “[t]he shift in media research and theory away from the passive couch potato of bullet theory to the active user seeking information and gratification finds an ultimate expression and qualifier in the Web sports fan...Fantasy leagues are now huge businesses...like gambling or sports channel obsessions, it can be addictive.” (Real 2006; 178)

The wealth which has flowed into the world of professional sports has trickled down to the athletes, some of whom are now among the most highly compensated celebrities in the world. In 2011, *Forbes* Magazine ranked the top 100 celebrities, based on a combination of tax income for previous year and both traditional and social media exposure (including Facebook and Twitter presence). Athletes claimed 19 of the 100 spots. Tiger Woods ahead of Taylor Swift; LeBron James ahead of Donald Trump; Kobe Bryant ahead of Leonardo Decaprio; David Beckham ahead of Jay-Z. (1) *Sports Illustrated* recently compiled a list of the Top 50 highest compensated athletes in the United States. Kobe Bryant of the NBA Los Angeles Lakers made, between his salary and endorsements, over \$45 million in 2012 alone, and he was ranked only fourth on the list. Boxer Floyd Mayweather was the highest breadwinner, earning about \$90 million dollars in 2012. Baseball player Alfonso Soriano closed out the Top 50 with just over \$18 million earned last year. (2)

The influence of successful professional athletes extends well beyond the financial and cultural realms, sometimes becoming explicitly political. Consider the case of political endorsements by athletes. For example, former Red Sox Pitcher Curt Schilling's robust efforts on behalf of the upstart Massachusetts GOP candidate Scott Brown, who won a special election in 2010 to replace Senator Edward Kennedy, as well as Schilling's active campaigning for the reelection of President George W. Bush, illustrate the emerging potential impact of athletic endorsements on politics. Beyond electoral campaigns, endorsements by athletes on particular policy issues have, on occasion, been quite effective, as when Magic Johnson of the Los Angeles Lakers spoke out on HIV/AIDS public health policy.

A quick survey of recent elections would suggest that the cultural popularity of sports has spilled over into politics, spawning athletes-turned-politicians. A partial list of former athletic figures have won elections for major public office since 2000 would include the following: one-time Republican House Conference Chair J.C. Watts (Former Quarterback for the University of Oklahoma), U.S. House Representative Tom Osborne (Former Head Football Coach at the University of Nebraska), “Blue Dog” Democrat U.S. House Representative Heath Shuler (Former All-American Quarterback for the University of Tennessee), U.S. House Representative Jon Runyon (Former NFL Philadelphia Eagles player), long time U.S. House Representative and Senator Jim Bunning (Hall of Fame Baseball Pitcher), U.S. House Representative Jim Ryun (Former Olympian in Track and Field), and U.S. Representative and candidate for House Majority Leader Steve Largent (Football Hall of Fame Wide Receiver). (Zink 2003; 209, West and Orman 2003) This phenomenon seems unlikely to abate anytime soon, as “one may safely assume that many retired jocks will undoubtedly try to continue to ride this American wave into elected office, and politicians will surely persist in creating a perception that they have significant common ground with their sports fan constituents.” (Zink 2003; 216)

Over the last thirty years, the national media exposure of sports has grown dramatically, while at the same time the public has seen a significant increase in its exposure to diverse sources of mass media. As Tomlinson argued, “sport and leisure cultures have been transformed, particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in ways that have increased their profile in everyday life and their importance as social, cultural, political, and economic presences, sometimes even forces...It would be a

mistake to see these presences, influences, and forces as separate. In the high-profile sports event, for instance, political, economic, and cultural dimensions coalesce.”

(Tomlinson 2005; 229) Sports also enjoys an especially good “fit” with the most important technology of the early twenty-first century, the internet, enhancing its appeal and social relevance. Fantasy sports has become a billion dollar industry in the United States, which functions hand-in-hand with the arrival of over a dozen round-the-clock sports channels, dozens of podcasting options, hundreds of Twitter feeds from athletes.

As Markovits and Rensmann point out, “Sports matter. They hold a singular position among leisure time activities and have an unparalleled impact on the everyday life of billions of people.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 1) Unlike many forms of celebrity and fame, sports comes equipped with story lines and the unpredictability of live, unscripted outcomes, which are then post facto assimilated into on-going narratives and story lines, complete with protagonists and antagonists. Unsurprisingly, ESPN has formed its own film company to facilitate the serialization and centralization of sports with the American public. Furthermore, federal Title IX legislation has contributed to a much greater interest in sport, across gender, than in previous generations, broadening interest in spectator sports and celebrity. (West and Orman 2003; 79) Taken as a whole, these developments have greatly increased the relevance of sports in American society, with potential implications for ideational communities and electoral politics.

It is my expectation that certain themes will likely emerge in chapters two through four which might explain such change – that the pathways to success by celebrity politicians have been influenced by the fit between candidates and emerging campaign/media approaches; that the current fit between celebrity politics and ascending



media has created conditions favorable to candidates with a background in forms of celebrity such as sports; that sports is an especially robust form of celebrity insofar as it taps into sources of bridging and bonding social capital, with potentially important political implications; that the increasing influence of sports in politics might transcend a simple signal of rejection of status quo politics, instead reflecting a source of meaningful agency by a restive public.

### **Review of Relevant Political Science Literature**

My project seeks to understand the implications of athletes-turned-politicians for American politics, both descriptively and normatively. The literature base within political science regarding athletes-turned-politicians is virtually non-existent, a void which this project aspires to begin to fill. Considerable literature does, of course, exist connecting sports and politics, but almost exclusively in an international context, focusing on the Olympics or disputes arising from particularly inflammatory nationalistic encounters, such as the Soccer War between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, or the riots in Egypt after the contentious Egypt-Algeria qualifying match prior to the 2010 World Cup. While such literature may eventually allow for the construction of useful comparative cases, the American case of sports and politics cannot necessarily be inferred from works studying events in other nations. A large body of literature does exist in the field of sociology regarding the cultural impact of sports in America, contemplating the relationship between sports and gender, competition, and violence. However, those texts are largely an outgrowth of the 1990s identity politics driven debates and do not anticipate offsetting arguments, such as those in the tradition of

Putnam, Street, and Fine. In addition, such sociological works rarely offer an explicit connection to the world of politics.

The field of American history has documented particular sporting events and the lives of athletes, but has not drawn broader conclusions about how sport systematically interacts with politics. Scholars of American politics, such as Yale University Professor Steven Skowronek, have argued that "...political scientists cannot depend on historians to organize...material for them. For one thing, historians are not dependent on politics, and in recent years, their interests have turned in other directions. More importantly, political scientists tend to have different interests in history than historians: they are less content just to figure out 'what happened' in the past, more intent on finding patterns and developing concepts that relate the past to the present." (Skowronek 2002; 751, Orren and Skowronek 2004)

Although the existing literature outside of American politics is insufficient to approach the questions contemplated by my project, I do believe such works may offer accounts and ideas which might be usefully incorporated into my analysis. Powerful objections to my theorizing can be found in the fields of History, Sociology, Cultural Studies and Celebrity Studies. Relevant authors from those disciplines will be considered in Chapter Two, in the context of presenting my theory of how athletes-turned-politicians function in American politics, and the numerous objections which might be mounted against that conception. In this chapter, I will offer a summary of the existing literature relevant to athletes-turned-politicians from the field of Political Science.

Within the discipline of political science only three books and a handful of recent articles and papers offer significant insight regarding the role of athletes-turned-

politicians in American politics. The first of those books was written by David Canon in 1990, entitled *Actors, Athletes, and Astronauts: Political Amateurs in the United States Congress*. This positively reviewed work has been called “insightful” and “accessible,” featuring a strong mix of “empirical and anecdotal” data. (Stuckey 1991) The central questions addressed by Canon were “(1) Under what conditions are amateurs elected to Congress? and (2) Does it make any difference that they are elected? More specifically, (1) Do political amateurs respond differently to electoral conditions than their experienced counterparts...and (2) Is there a demonstrable link between the candidates political backgrounds and their behavior within Congress.” (Canon 1990; xii)

Canon began by pointing to the lack of available research on political amateurs, noting that “...current research is often limited by a simplistic view of the amateur as a single type, or by the assumption that all politicians hold similar goals. Rather than viewing all inexperienced candidates as nonstrategic and ineffective, one should recognize that amateurs run the full range of quality – from the hopeless neophytes in the House elections to the Bill Bradley’s and John Glenn’s in the Senate.” (Canon 1990; 17) In disaggregating the concept of political amateurs via a “modified rational choice model,” Canon provided “a challenge to conventional wisdom” in arguing that Congress is not overwhelmingly dominated by just “practiced political professionals who have worked their way up from the local to the state and federal level.” (Stuckey 1991) According to Canon, amateurs may differ from experienced politicians in four respects: “their goals, their campaign strategies, their costs and benefits of running, and their information-gathering and –processing capabilities.” (Canon 1990; 34) This finding is significant because “a central assumption of most purposive models of political behavior,

is that the primary goal of experienced politicians will be election or reelection.

Amateurs, on the other hand, will have a mix of goals: election, policy, and other (e.g., to help their party, perform a civil duty, or pursue personal and nonpolitical career considerations).” (Canon 1990; 35)

Canon separated political amateurs into three, non-mutually exclusive (and often overlapping) categories: ambition-based, policy-based, and hopeless. Ambition-based amateurs will most closely “resemble their experienced counterparts’ behavior, because both types are primarily concerned with electoral goals.” (Canon 1990; 26) This marks ambition-based amateurs as being more risk-averse in entering races, “because a bad showing in an initial race will damage their standing as future candidates.” (Canon 1990; 35) According to Canon, policy-based amateurs “relative lack of concern for electoral goals is distinctive. Policy advocates are less strategic in their behavior than experienced politicians because they are less concerned with electoral goals...Policy seekers have a mix of office-seeking and policy goals (obviously, to have the greatest impact in shaping policy, one must be elected)...These amateurs may resemble the citizen-politicians of the nineteenth century who entered politics for a brief time and then returned to their permanent occupations.” (Canon 1990; 27-28) Finally, hopeless amateurs, who are the most commonly found, are identified as a category. (Canon 1990; 30-31) This designation is not intended as a negative judgment. As Canon noted, “[t]he term hopeless is not intended in the pejorative sense (often hopeless amateurs have well-developed political skills). Rather, the term refers to the surprising nature of the amateur’s campaign which an objective analysis may have deemed hopeless.” (Canon 1990; xv)

Throughout his book, Canon offered up a series of valuable insights about political amateurs which have some relevance in understanding athletes-turned-politicians. He pointed out the profound advantages enjoyed by experienced politicians. Despite such disadvantages, Canon finds that political amateurs are disproportionately inclined to overestimate their chances of electoral victory, relative to their experienced counterparts. (Canon 1990; 39) This perspective is consistent with a broader sentiment in the political science community that “amateurs are the cannon fodder of congressional elections...A consequence of politician’s collective cautiousness and amateurs collective ineffectiveness, the literature concludes, is increased incumbency safety.” (Canon 1990; xii)

The disadvantages of political inexperience can sometimes be overcome by conducting an “outsider” campaign. Canon deployed Jimmy Carter as an example of a successful outsider campaign, noting that “Carter, while not a complete amateur, had limited experience for a presidential candidate. Carter successfully ran against Washington by emphasizing that he was just a peanut farmer, not a political insider. The confidence of the people in their government was at an all-time low, so they were willing to give inexperience a chance.” (Canon 1990; 35) This version of “political jujitsu” (Greenfield 1980) allows a potential weakness, during times of discontent with the political process, to be transformed into a source of electoral strength. Another obvious advantage, available to celebrity based political candidates, can be found via name recognition. Canon observed that “Strong name recognition before the start of the campaign is a tremendous advantage for any candidate, but is an especially valuable

commodity for amateurs, who typically start at a marked disadvantage in this regard.”  
(Canon 1990; 88-89)

In terms of job performance, Canon’s study of congressmen found that political amateurs tended to underperform while in office; they tend to be “less active on the floor, more focused on a policy area; less likely to attain leadership positions, and have careers that are shorter than the norm.” (Canon 1990; 41) Despite these deficiencies, Canon argued that political amateurs provide five important, albeit under researched, benefits to the political process: “amateurs have a hand in (1) providing democratic accountability in Congressional elections, (2) resisting socialization pressures in the House and Senate, (3) party building, (4) policy change, and (5) institutional change.” (Canon 1990; 157) Canon ends his book by noting that he “will not conclude with a call for...an end to amateurism in Congress...in general, amateurs can have a beneficial impact on the political system as agents of political change, as instruments of party building, and as the last defense against irrevocable tenure for House members.” (Canon 1990; 164)

Canon’s book, while offering important insights, suffers from the limitations of having been written twenty years ago and focusing on House elections. Moreover, Canon wrote about when and why political amateurs seek elective office, and the implications for government once they begin serving, rather than as much on the distinctiveness of their campaign approaches. Canon did consider the role of celebrities seeking office, insofar as they enjoy an advantage in electability (relative to other political amateurs) based on name recognition. However, he points to the lack of scholarly writings available on celebrity politicians, calling for greater research in this emerging area.

In 2010, on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Actors, Athletes, and Astronauts*, he wrote a retrospective essay on political amateurism. Canon's revised view considers victories by outsiders, perhaps in part as a function of our evolving media culture, as becoming increasingly likely. Indeed, he expressed surprise that so few athletes-turned-politicians won Congressional races in the 2010 election cycle. (Canon 2010; 2) Canon did spotlight the distinctive advantages enjoyed by contemporary athletes-turned-politicians; 1) name recognition, 2) access to campaign funds, and 3) greater comfort in dealing with the media. (Canon 2010; 3) Still, more than twenty years after calling for more research on political amateurism, Canon does not feel this challenge has yet been met.

In *Celebrity Politics*, published in 2003, Darrell West did attempt to answer the challenge posed by Canon back in the early nineties. West offered a brief, yet useful, analysis of the advantages which can accrue to celebrities when they seek elective office. West (and Orman's) book constituted a strong entry point to the subject of celebrity and politics, but devoted only a twelve page chapter to sports, merely scratching the surface of an increasingly important discussion. In his brief analysis, West agrees with Canon about certain advantages enjoyed by athletes-turned-politicians in winning elections. West wrote that, like "their Hollywood brothers and sisters, sports stars do well in elections because of their high name identification, financial resources, favorable media coverage, and celebrity status in a society that values sports figures." (West and Orman 2003; 87) Ultimately, West tended to treat athletes-turned-politicians as typical of the broader class of celebrities-turned-politicians. Significantly, he offered a five category typology of celebrity politicians: political newsworthies (politicians and handlers skilled

at public relations and self-promotion), legacies (children or spouses of former politicians), famed nonpoliticos known in fields outside of politics who run for elective office, famed nonpoliticos who act as lobbyists or issue spokespersons (such as actors, singers, business people, athletes, and astronauts), and event celebrities (individuals such as crime victims who gain notoriety overnight due to some tragedy, event, or life situation).” (West and Orman 2003; 2)

West viewed an increasing politics of celebrity as a natural outgrowth of the rising influence of the mass media in the lives of Americans. As a result, we are increasingly likely to see celebrities seek political office. West argued that the era of celebrity politics can be understood to have started in the 1960s, around the time when Ronald Reagan was elected Governor of California in 1966. Reagan was followed into political office by Jack Kemp, Bill Bradley, John Glenn, Clint Eastwood, and Fred Grandy, as “a glut of celebrity politicians began to emerge in the political system.” (West and Orman 2003; 10) West concluded that “[t]he proliferation of media outlets, the emphasis on image-making and tabloid-style gossip, the ability of celebrities to sell newspapers, and the winnowing role performed by journalists give celebrities important advantages in the American political system. By bringing with them high name identification and the ability to curry favor with journalists, famous people have emerged as prominent candidates in a celebrity-saturated culture.” (West and Orman 2003; 29) West claimed that the media treats celebrities as “white knights,” resulting in their having “a high degree of public trustworthiness and star power to boot.” (West and Orman 2003; 4) This advantage can have a profound effect in political campaigns, because “famed nonpoliticos...are used to being in the public spotlight and dealing with the



accouterments of celebrityhood—media coverage, adoring fans, gossip columnists, and intrusions into their private lives. This experience makes their entry into a regime based on celebrity politics easier to handle.” (West and Orman 2003; 4)

Where West differs sharply from Canon is in his analysis of the implications of the rise of celebrity politicians for American democracy. West blamed the decline in influence of traditional media sources, arguing that the “good old days when a prestige press composed of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, ABC, CBS, NBC, and the wire services dominated civic life has given way to the decline of the media establishment and the rise of alternative viewing options... The previous era when top media figures broke the news and dictated how top stories were reported is over and has been replaced by a Wild West of news coverage.” (West and Orman 2003; 18) This has pushed media outlets to “cover politics in the style of ‘sports reporters,’” resulting in news coverage which is “too informative about personal themes and horse-race coverage, and not informative enough about substantive issues.” (West and Orman 2003; 21) In such a setting, “stars are often treated as great intellectuals and oracles for society,” while enjoying a tendency by the media “to treat celebrities with an unusual amount of deference in public debate,” allowing “stars to become major politicians.” (West and Orman 2003; 116) As a result, the United States “cannot aspire to having a political system of philosopher-kings because today we have the ‘celebrity kind and queen’ in our star-laden politics.” (West and Orman 2003; 1-2) West explicitly implicates sport in this criticism, writing that if “organized religion is the opiate of the masses, as Karl Marx maintained, then perhaps the organized sports system in the United States is the opiate for Americans... Many citizens follow sports to such a degree that they are removed from

serious political thought about crisis issues facing the United States. Richard Lipsky has noted that the United States resembles a ‘jockocracy’ in that sports talk dominates the political and business worlds for Americans.” (West and Orman 2003; 77)

To fairly reflect the nuances of West’s position, he did point to several potential advantages associated with celebrity politics, including their relative freedom of action. West acknowledged that celebrity politicians are “typically are less beholden to vested political interests because of their own wealth or ability to raise money from friends and family members. In a political world where entangling alliances are the rule, these kinds of individuals are as close to autonomous free agents as one can find in the American political process.” (West and Orman 2003; 111) However, in the final analysis, West clearly fears the corrosive effects of the emerging celebrity politics on American democracy, arguing that “celebrity politics accentuates many of the elements in our society that drain substance out of the political process...Over the long run, this risks the short-circuiting of representative democracy and endangers the ability of ordinary citizens to hold leaders accountable for their policymaking decisions.” (West and Orman 2003; 113) West’s robust and broad-based denunciation of celebrity politics were “premised on a set of assumptions about, *inter alia*, the proper nature and character of political representation. Their particular claim is that representatives owe citizens a duty of informed political judgement. Both types of celebrity politician threaten the principles of representative democracy either because they privilege appearance over substance, or because they marginalise relevant experience.” (Street 2004; 440)

In 2010, as was the case with David Canon, Darrell West returned to the subject of celebrity politics with an article in the Brookings Institute’s *Issues in Governance*

*Studies*. Once again, the race-to-the-bottom nature of contemporary competition between media outlets garners the lion's share of the blame for West. He argues that the "media collapse has made it difficult to cover substantive policy challenges, especially on controversial subjects. Policy issues such as health care or energy security are vastly complex. The mass public only has limited attention for the intricacies of such matters, and it is hard to explain policy tradeoffs...At the very time when leaders need to appeal to the public for support, it is hard to engage citizens in substantive decision-making." (West 2010; 3-4) However, in this article West seems much more accepting of the seeming omnipresence of celebrity's influence on political culture. Claiming that "helping educate the citizenry about the need for institutional fixes or policy solutions is of crucial importance," West argues that we must "examine new ways of establishing a media dialogue with broader audiences about policy costs and benefits, including taking advantage of celebrities and entertainment-based activism." (West 2010; 6-7) With that said, West seems to only grudgingly grant celebrity politics a role in contemporary democratic deliberation, and then only as spokespersons or cheerleaders, not policymakers.

Andrei Markovits and Lars Rensmann's recent book, *Gaming the World: How Sports are Reshaping Global Politics and Change*, offers a far more optimistic assessment of celebrity politics, at least insofar as it concerns sports. (Markovits and Rensmann 2010) Unlike the first two books considered in this literature review, Markovits and Rensmann do not directly consider the implications of athletes-turned-politics for American politics. They focus primarily on the global significance of soccer, although they do consider the impact of some major U.S. sporting events, such as the

Super Bowl or NBA Finals. (Logan 2012) Markovits and Rensmann offer a strong defense of the notion that sports can help build political community, that “sports’ merit-based cosmopolitanism has furthered progressive developments in culture, society, and politics,” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 269-70) and that sports can function as “a social equalizer while transcending boundaries, neighborhoods, and national borders.” (Logan 2012; 191) Indeed, Markovits and Rensmann explore “how sports and sports culture affect political and cultural inclusion, how they both deconstruct and construct national identity, and how, in what manner, and to which extent they facilitate a kind of ‘global citizenship’ and global community...conceiv[ing] of sports as an independent variable: as a powerful force of political and cultural change around the globe.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 12-13)

The powerful influence of sports derives in part from its art-like cultural and political influence, “speak[ing] to emotions that create a bevy of ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ capital that are competing, yet both are important in the creation and maintenance of key collective identities,” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 322) constituting a “cultural-political phenomenon” which has been “fostered by the economic, political, and technological developments of the last couple of decades.” (LaVaque-Manty 2011; 165) One reviewer tellingly observed that the “key mechanism is, at least metaphorically, linguistic. Soccer provides a common language that unites people who speak different languages and have different values...It is worth noting that Rensmann is, among other things, a Hannah Arendt scholar, although she is never mentioned in the book, and that the development described is consistent with a kind of Arendtian cosmopolitan vision.” (LaVaque-Manty 2011; 166)

As valuable a contribution as Markovits and Rensmann's work makes to the cultural-political potential of spectator sports, it does not fully explain outcomes such as those in the Bing and Johnson cases for two reasons. First, in focusing primarily on the cosmopolitan potential of soccer, they have selected a case which they acknowledge has limited applicability to U.S. electoral politics. *Gaming the World* does a strong job of developing non-U.S. cases for eventual comparison with American political culture, but did not offer a U.S.-based analysis of elections (and athletes-turned-politicians). Second, the U.S. case Markovits and Rensmann most strongly consider, college sports, is one where the U.S. is clearly an outlier. Clotfelter noted that that college sports are "an authentic case of American exceptionalism: in no other country in the world is commercialized athletic competition so closely tied to institutions of higher education...Only in the United States has there grown up such an elaborate system of publicized and commercialized sports contest involving university-sponsored teams." (Clotfelter 2011; 6) As Markovits and Rensmann noted, sports-related "revenues for the 123 college and universities listed as Division I-A by the Department of Education amounted to nearly \$5 billion in 2007." (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 278) Indeed, many U.S. colleges "sponsor athletic programs whose revenues, media coverage, and notoriety give them a striking resemblance to professional sports franchises." (Clotfelter 2011; xi)

Interestingly, because college sports functions as such a distinctly strong outlier regarding American sporting culture, the vast array of American universities would seem to offer expanded opportunities for sports to ultimately engage the realm of the political.

Given the rising prominence of women's sports, college sports may ultimately represent the most likely route by which women join the ranks of athletes-turned-politicians.

Somewhat to my amazement, these three works of Canon, West, and Markovits (and Rensmann) constitute the entirety of books relevant to athletes-turned-politicians in the field of political science. In recent years, however, several journal articles and conference papers have made some initial attempts to explore a potential relationship between spectator sports and electoral politics. For example, a recent paper at the Midwest Political Science Association conference, entitled "Euphoria and Retrospective Voting: The Impact of College Football Outcomes on Incumbent Re-election," provoked significant discussion by establishing a statistically significant relationship between sporting events and electoral outcomes. (Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2009) When that paper was subsequently turned into an article, "the [m]ain finding [was] a 1 percent boost in the incumbent party after each college football victory." (Miller 2013; 63) The title of the article, "Irrelevant Events Affect Voters' Evaluations of Government Performance," (Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010) speaks to the skepticism of the authors for sports as a potentially meaningful influence in a healthy democracy.

Of potentially greater interest is a recent article by Michael Miller in *Social Science Quarterly*, entitled "For the Win! The Effect of Professional Sports Records on Mayoral Elections." (Miller 2013) Miller "demonstrates that professional sports records significantly influence vote shares and winning probabilities in mayoral reelection races, exceeding in magnitude the effects of unemployment... Winning records among professional sports teams proxy higher city-wide happiness (Schwartz et al. 1987, Wann et al. 2001, Hagen et al. 2004, Forment 2007), but are unlikely to factor into voters'

appraisals of political performance. As a result, the link serves as evidence that the Prosperity Model shares some explanatory power with the Appraisal Model, contributing to our growing understanding of the psychological foundations of voting.” (Miller 2013; 60) In distinguishing between these models, Miller points out an effect inconsistent with most rational choice based models of voting behavior. He notes that “[m]ost descriptions of retrospective voting follow the Appraisal Model in positing that voters decide their support based on explicit associations between politicians and outcomes (Key 1966, Fiorina 1981, Peffley 1984, Chappell and Keech 1985, Boyne et al. 2009)...An alternative explanation for retrospective voting is that rather than connecting politicians to praiseworthy outcomes, voters favor incumbents when they feel happy. Since good economic times and the like promote well-being, this Prosperity Model is sufficient to account for retrospective voting.” (Miller 2013; 60-61)

This effect described by Miller has the potential to be surprisingly significant. Miller’s model estimates that “about 1 in 17 modern major-city elections are decided by variation in sports records,” with a 6.1 percent change in the share of the incumbent vote, a margin of victory exceeding that of “Michael Bloomberg in 2009 or Rudy Giuliani in 1997.” (Miller 2013; 74) Interestingly, Miller does not see such seemingly irrational outcomes as cause for concern, noting that “voters are imperfect and occasionally irrational. It does not follow that democracy is seriously questioned. In fact, voting for incumbents when well-being is high is a sensible rule of thumb for voters who cannot reliably connect the dots between political actions and outcomes.” (Miller 2013; 75)

Miller’s article illustrates well how the passion Americans feel for sports can influence political calculations, perhaps even deliberation. However, this work is

ultimately of limited utility to this project, as Miller is not considering cases of explicit politics, where athletes-turned-politicians are openly deploying their celebrity in an effort to win elective office. This problem is emblematic of the scant literature available on spectator sports and electoral politics in the field of political science. To the limited extent that political scientists even consider American celebrity politicians to be worthy of study, they tend to be “more interested in broader theoretical questions about how amateurs fit into the political career structure and what their presence means for our theories of political ambition and strategic politicians,” (Canon 2010; 6-7) rather than the implications for democratic deliberation and agency. My project attempts to address this deficiency; endeavoring to fill a gap in the literature.

My hope is that in developing theory about athletes-turned-politicians and considering the cases of Dave Bing and Kevin Johnson, my project can establish the foundation for an on-going series of potential research lines in subfields including American politics, political theory, and comparative politics, with particularly strong implications for political communication, urban politics, electoral politics legislative studies, politics and history, voting behavior, and race, ethnicity and politics.

### **Structure of Inquiry**

Chapter One has attempted to orient the reader to relevant history and literature necessary to analyze the unlikely mayoral victories of Dave Bing and Kevin Johnson. In chapter two, I will introduce my theory of how the electoral success of athletes-turned-politicians operates, isolating three categories of expectations for such celebrity politicians, before commenting on their limitations and offering modifications to existing theory. In doing so, I will contend that sports can tap into an aspirational political



impulse in a way not all celebrity does, presenting itself as a constructive form of group based social capital.

Sports, as Nelson Mandela has argued, can function as an especially powerful form of symbolic politics. Perhaps sports might serve as a bridge toward an aspirational politics. Although the United States shouldn't be cavalierly analogized to South Africa, (3) sports may be found to function in the U.S. as an ideational community, one which carries with it the potential to spill over into the realm of the openly political. In fact, recently President Obama claimed during an interview with ESPN that sports had the potential to bring Americans together in a way little else could, (4) as it did after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon. (Tomlinson 2005; 230-31) Sports fans are first brought together through anxiety, then celebration (or shared misery), and then, finally memory. Few spectacles can rival the world of sports as such an intense source of both bridging and bonding social capital.

Such a theory of sports and social capital has important implications for American politics in at least two respects. First, implicit politics – sports based social capital can have an indirect, but still meaningful, effect on American political life by facilitating the formation of ideational communities. Second, explicit politics – sports based social capital may function as an instrumental factor in among the most explicitly political aspects of American life, electoral politics. Despite the explanatory potential represented by this phenomenon, the burgeoning study of social capital has yet to turn to examination of the relationship between spectator sports and social capital.

In developing and defending a theory of how athletes-turned-politician function in American politics throughout Chapter Two, I consider five distinct challenges: (1)

Celebrity is not a significant factor in politics, (2) Sports is not a significant part of celebrity culture, (3) Sport is typical of celebrity culture, (4) Sports celebrity impedes effective representative and deliberative democracy, and (5) Sports is a poor venue for political community, as it is implicated in violence and discrimination. In doing so, I will draw heavily upon relevant literature from the fields of History, Sociology, and Cultural (and Celebrity) Studies.

In Chapters Three and Four, I attempt to operationalize the concepts described in the first two chapters, by examining a specific manifestations of the influence of sports in American politics: electoral politics. In particular, I will develop the recent cases of Dave Bing and Kevin Johnson, both in reference to how they were elected, as well as to how effectively they have served in office as mayors of major U.S. cities. By engaging in process-tracing based analyses of these cases, I hope to illuminate how sports-based celebrity can influence political campaigns and the business of day-to-day governance.

A concern with my case selection might be that it risks selecting cases on the dependent variable. However, I believe that concern to be mitigated by the nature of my inquiry. This is a hypotheses generating project. It seeks to create and synthesize theory in an area where concept formation is underdeveloped. If it were a hypothesis testing project, the expectations for case selection would, and should, be quite different. I believe that without additional concept formation and theory building, given the paucity of available literature on athletes-turned-politicians, a hypothesis testing based project would be premature.

It is my belief that the descriptive work undertaken in these chapters will offer valuable insights into the mechanisms whereby athletes, and perhaps other forms of

celebrity, gain political influence in society. In Chapter Five, I will search for synthesis between the theory articulated in the first two chapters and the empirical data offered by the case studies in the third and fourth chapters, as well as suggesting potentially fruitful pathways for future research. My inquiry attempts to challenge the conventional notion that celebrity politics simply functions as a rejection of deliberative democracy and individual agency. Instead, the black box of celebrity politics, once cracked open, disaggregated, and explored in reference to spectator sports, might hold more optimistic possibilities than West and others have anticipated.

The political science community has been disinclined to look at a potential relationship between sports and American politics until there have been well developed comparative cases. However, such cases cannot be developed without equipping ourselves with the tools to do so. It is my belief that this project holds the potential to equip the political science community with some of those tools.

## Notes

1 Associated Press. 2011. "19 of Top 100 Celebrities are Sports Figures." May 18.  
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2 Roberts, Daniel. 2013. "Sports Illustrated: Fortunate 50."  
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3 Rob Hughes. "In the West Bank, Openly Political Soccer." *New York Times*. 9 March 2011. P. B12.

4 Tau, Byron. 2012. "Obama: Sports a Great 'Unifier.'" November 5.  
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## **CHAPTER TWO – CONSIDERING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORTS AND POLITICS**

On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1998, Jesse Ventura was elected Governor of Minnesota. The former WWF professional wrestling superstar turned movie actor “ran against two better-known candidates, legacy Hubert Humphrey, III, and Norm Coleman, and garnered 37 percent of the three-way vote.” (West and Orman 2003; 11) West and Orman presented Ventura’s election as a prime example of celebrity electoral politics in their book, noting that by using, “anti-establishment ads and shining in campaign debates, Ventura demonstrated that sports politicians could transfer fame to the political process.” (West and Orman 2003; 11) The media treated his election with a mix of shock and derision, as “newspapers chose to feature Jesse ‘The Body’ Ventura on their front pages. The jewel-encrusted chin, Lycra tights, and the flying hair said it all: Minnesota’s Governor-elect was Bozo the Clown on steroids. Professional pundits jumped on what they unequivocally ruled a failure of political judgment.” (Disch 1999)

I remember that day vividly, as I was working as the Assistant Dean at a Minneapolis-area High School at the time. Many of the staff had voted during their breaks and, as they passed by my office throughout the day, it struck me as odd that a large number of teachers had said basically the same thing: “I can’t believe I did it. I voted for Ventura! I know it’s ridiculous, but I was so sick of Humphrey and Coleman that I just couldn’t bear to vote for them. And I really liked Ventura’s ads.” Coming from a group of well-educated, left-leaning teachers, it was difficult for me to contain my

surprise at their comments. It was as if they were voting for the school mascot for Class President out of frustration with the state of student government. When, years later, I read West and Orman's 2003 book *Celebrity Politics*, I could relate to their scorn and concerns regarding the election of Ventura. However, as I considered their conclusions more carefully, I became increasingly wary of how they and others in the academy had categorized Ventura's victory.

First, most accounts of his victory had assumed that Ventura had somehow managed to mobilize only an entertainment-centric, anti-intellectual portion of eligible voters. However, "Ventura would never have taken the Governor's office if he had prevailed only among KFAN sports radio listeners and pro wrestling enthusiasts... In the end, Ventura defied predictions that he would draw his support primarily from sport fans. His voters were distributed throughout the state, balanced between men and women, and fairly even across income categories – with the exception of households with incomes over \$100,000." (Disch 1999) Second, many accounts assumed Ventura had run an unsophisticated campaign, winning purely off of a novelty factor. However, he turned in a strong debate performance (Disch 1999) and took advantage of "lax restrictions on late voter registration that allowed him to capitalize on a last minute swing in momentum by attracting unregistered voters to the polls." (Kamons 2007; 145-46) Third, many pundits and academics considered Ventura to be emblematic of the rise of celebrity in American politics, with potentially significant negative implications for democracy. Indeed, West and Orman featured Ventura's photo on the cover of their book. However, as I reflected on what I had seen that day in Minnesota, I could conclude neither that Ventura's election was typical of either past celebrities and/or athletes-turned-politicians, nor that such a

development should be regarded as an overwhelmingly negative development for American democracy, especially given the potential alternatives.

This chapter will consider three expectations for such politicians in the existing literature, within Political Science and related fields, so that they might function as a baseline for my case studies of Mayors Bing and Johnson. I will also examine the limitations of those expectations and offer alternative theoretical explanations of how celebrity politics might function for athletes-turned-politicians. Then I will address five significant objections and challenges, in distinct sections, to the alternative explanations which I have offered.

### **Expectations for Athletes-Turned-Politicians**

In this section I will draw upon the available literature to assess what current expectations are for athletes-turned-politicians, as well as celebrity politicians more broadly. I will also attempt to articulate my areas of agreement and disagreement with this conventional wisdom.

#### ***1) Athletes-turned-Politicians will have limited tools and rarely win elections***

The expectation among political scientists is that celebrity politicians of any stripe should rarely win any significant election. As mentioned previously, voting for athletes-turned-politicians would be regarded as irrational, and therefore highly unlikely, within virtually all significant models of voting behavior. Experienced politicians should be able to defeat political amateurs with relative ease. As Canon noted, “Common sense dictates that experienced candidates should be more successful. Survey research [by Leuthold] indicates that voters value political experience in candidates for public office. Of thirty desirable qualities for political candidates ranked in various polls, ranging from

youth and good health to courage and intelligence, political experience was the only one consistently mentioned as the ‘most important characteristic.’ Journalists, in their coverage of the campaigns, also focus on the candidates’ experience... Clarke and Evans find that incumbents receive roughly twelve times as much coverage of their political attributes as challengers.” (Canon 1990; 110) As a result, victories for celebrity politicians seemingly only become possible within a very narrow range of circumstances. Traditionally, two conditions have been considered necessary, if not necessarily sufficient, for victory by a celebrity politician to become possible.

First, strong discontent with the present political system and/or its actors must be present. The work of t’Hart and Tindall (2009) is especially useful in explaining that “the electorate may be more responsive to celebrities who seek to win office if overall levels of trust in the established political system and party politicians are low- and, disillusioned, they turn to more unconventional alternatives or political outsiders.” (Marsh et al 2010; 324-25) In this regard, the election of Jesse Ventura presents itself as a promising situation for a celebrity candidate to emerge victorious, as did the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor of California.

Second, a weak party structure dramatically increases the chances of success for political amateurs. Kamons explains that “[c]elebrity politicians often run as populist outsiders who can reach across the aisles and who can draw disaffected voters into the political process. As such, they succeed best where party systems are poorly entrenched and barriers to outside entry are low... Where the party system is weak and politics personalized, celebrity often carries more weight.” (Kamons 2007; 145-46) Both of the circumstances relate to the ripeness of running as a political outsider. As Marsh noted,



“To win office, celebrity politicians tend to capitalise on their position as popular public figures, combining it with self-conscious posturing as ‘political outsiders,’ not ‘tainted’ with the awkward compromises, linguistic obfuscation and endemic opportunism that, they claim, professional politics imposes upon its practitioners.” (Marsh et al 2010; 324)

Of course, celebrity politicians have numerous tools at their disposal. Although clearly chagrined by the implications, West and Orman do an excellent job identifying four such factors specific to athletes-turned-politicians: “Athletes share many of the same kinds of advantages held by entertainment celebrities. Like their Hollywood brothers and sisters, sports stars do well in elections because of their high name identification, financial resources, favorable media coverage, and celebrity status in a society that values sports figures.” (West and Orman 2003; 87) In his 2010 article, Canon argues that increasingly a fifth advantage accrues to athletes-turned-politicians: “As L.Z. Henderson of ESPN.com notes, ‘[I]t is interesting how the country’s recent history of professional athletes making the leap to politics comes after two decades of explosive sports coverage...Is there any doubt that elected office is a natural career progression for those accustomed to the public eye?’ Chris Dudley [the former NBA center who lost a close race for Governor of Oregon] said that his basketball career taught him lessons that were useful on the campaign trail, ‘If you win three games in a row, you’re a hero. If you lose three games in a row, you’re a bum. The one who succeeds [in both sports and politics] is the one who realizes he’s neither, who works hard and does the best he can and not let himself get too high or too low.’” (Canon 2010; 3)

The ideal circumstances for victory, as well as to the various tools available to athletes-turned-politicians expressed by West and Orman, seem to explain well the

victories of many celebrity politicians. However, I suspect that, increasingly, such ideal circumstances may not be necessary for political amateurs to win. It is possible that they might win even when an incumbent is popular and there is no broad-based frustration with the relevant political institutions. Similarly, new tools may be emerging for celebrity politicians, which we might discover in the course of considering my two case studies (Chapters Three and Four) of Mayors Bing and Johnson. Victories by those two mayors may also reflect a different impulse in voting behavior than that described by critics of celebrity politics, especially as regards contemporary athletes-turned-politicians.

I would disaggregate victories by modern celebrity politicians into two categories: First Wave and Second Wave. First Wave celebrity politicians tend to only win when there is broad dissatisfaction with the relevant political structure and become increasingly likely to prevail in settings where the local party structure is weak or irrelevant. The tools of First Wave celebrity politicians can include strong name recognition, financial independence, and, at least initially, gentle treatment by the media. First Wave celebrity politicians are those described well by both West and Canon. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger might serve as a late-stage example of such a politician. I contend that Mayor Dave Bing might ultimately also be placed in this category.

Second Wave celebrity politicians possess those same tools, but have a stronger set of tools available to them than their First Wave counterparts, as well as a broader range of circumstances in which they can win. The flattening of the mass media world facilitated by new communication platforms and the demise of media “gatekeepers” has created a more celebrity conscious culture, producing a generation of celebrities who are used to being constantly in the public eye and scrutinized with an eye toward gossip and

salacious innuendo. This has become especially true, in the era of Sportscenter and Twitter feeds, for athletes-turned-politicians, who have already established public identities, complete with heroic storylines, with the potential voting public before even contemplating a political campaign. Such public identities can function as a kind of “Teflon Shield,” insulating celebrity politicians against attacks on their character which would be substantially more damaging to a traditional political candidate.

Second Wave athletes-turned-politicians tap into the hearts and minds of the voting public via the cycle of shared tension, outcome, and memory which is especially strong in the world of spectator sports, forming a sense of community which can spill over into the world of both implicit and explicit politics. While the conditions conducive to First Wave celebrity candidate victories still function as a fertile environment for Second Wave celebrity candidates, this new category of politicians might be able to win even when widespread discontent is not present among voters and where a party structure is not particularly weak. I contend that Mayor Kevin Johnson might ultimately be classified as a Second Wave celebrity politician.

## ***2) Athletes-turned-Politicians will rarely perform well once elected to office***

As mentioned in the literature review offered in Chapter One, David Canon’s 1990 book remains the best, indeed only, book to seriously consider the political careers of celebrity politicians. His view is that, once elected, they tend to perform well below the mean. (Canon 1990; 41) However, Canon’s work is limited in that it is based on data drawn from a quarter century ago and only considers celebrities who have served in Congress. Celebrity politics has changed a great deal during that time.

Although much less analytical in approaching the question, West and Orman offer a robust elucidation of the concerns associated with the performance of political amateurs, writing that "...a political system based on celebrity politics raises a host of troubling problems for democratic political systems. What we have done is develop a system where star power is weighted more heavily than traditional political skills such as bargaining, compromise, and experience. In earlier times, traditional politicians who rose through the ranks and who were skilled at compromise and conflict resolution were advantaged...Now, these types of people have been replaced by another type of leader, namely those who are famous, media-savvy, and adept at fund-raising...The danger is that in this fundamental shift, important qualities such as experience, knowledge, and bargaining are de-emphasized, and that the system's ability to resolve conflict will suffer accordingly." (West and Orman 2003; 112)

Such a perspective strikes me as unjustifiably negative. First, West and Orman offer surprisingly little data to support their claim. In the face of compelling counterexamples of effective celebrity politicians – Bill Bradley, Jack Kemp, John Glenn, and Ronald Reagan immediately come to mind – such a repudiation of this class of politicians seems rather hasty. Second, athletes-turned-politicians may well be developing skills which allow them to better traverse the often challenging landscape of day-to-day politics. Successful athletes in team sports must develop leadership skills and grace-under-pressure which is likely to serve them well when encountering tense political environments. Also, increasingly, athletes are media savvy, doing on-the-fly press conferences on a nightly basis. They are often more comfortable with social media, an increasingly important form of political communication, than older, mainstream

politicians. Finally, successful politicians of all stripes must be comfortable dealing with potential donors and stake holders who are often wealthy and/or are members of the business community. As the wealth of athletes has exploded over the past quarter century, they have developed portfolios and business interests which make such associations far more likely to be positive than for past professional athletes, who often had to supplement their relatively low wages with offseason jobs selling insurance or cars. Given the lack of research on the question of job performance regarding athletes-turned-politicians, it is my belief that my case studies of Mayors Bing and Johnson might shed greater light on the question.

### ***3) The presence of Athletes-turned-Politicians constitutes a negative development for American Democracy***

In the context of discussing celebrity politics in Chapter One, a strong version of the democracy-based argument against celebrity politicians is presented. West and Orman consider it perhaps the most damning argument against celebrity politics, claiming that, "...celebrity politics accentuates many of the elements in our society that drain substance out of the political process and substitutes trivial and nonsubstantive forms of entertainment. Over the long run, this risks the short-circuiting of representative democracy and endangers the ability of ordinary citizens to hold leaders accountable for their policymaking decisions." (West and Orman 2003; 113) Although not being "...proponents of the policies favored by the people they represent is a criticism that could also be applied to any number of successful politicians who entrée to the field came from family connections, inside maneuvering, or other more nefarious activities than good looks and charisma...[somehow] celebrity appears somehow more despicable than these other archetypes because the asset being traded upon is so transparent, and the very

strength of their public persona raises awkward questions about the nature of democracy that are not so easy to brush aside.” (Kamons 2007; 146)

I contend that this appraisal is overly harsh and monochromatic in its characterization of celebrity politics, especially as regards athletes-turned-politicians. Democratic values can be found in the formation of political community and civic engagement, not merely in the enactment of rational choice-driven, policy outcome based voting behavior. Such values might be promoted by celebrity politics in both direct and indirect ways, taking advantage of an aspirational political impulse associated especially strongly with athletes-turned-politicians. Furthermore, West and Orman argue that the rise of celebrity politics precludes the possibility of our electing “philosopher-kings” (West and Orman 2003; 1-2) and riffs off of Marx in arguing that sports functions as “the opiate for Americans.” (West and Orman 2003; 77) Of course, there is no reason to believe that in the absence of celebrity involvement in politics, a renaissance in enlightened political discourse would occur in the United States. More likely, our media saturated society would simply tune out politics to an even greater degree. Sports, I believe, possesses aspirational elements which make the election of athletes-turned-politicians less damaging to democracy than other forms of celebrity politics. In fact, the interaction of sports with politics may lead to new and productive forms of political community.

### **Theoretical Challenges**

At least five challenges to my argument; that athletes-turned-politicians are increasingly likely to be elected to public office and that such a development need not be considered an ominous sign, must be addressed. Frankly speaking, some of the answers

to these challenges will likely appear, at times, to be redundant with my answers to previous challenges. However, as not all of these challenges will be germane to the specific objections lodged by a by a particular critic of my theorizing, I have endeavored to treat these objections as distinct, non-overlapping, claims. For those seeking a more efficient approach, a more succinct treatment these objections is offered in the final chapter of this project.

***1) Celebrity is not a significant factor in politics***

On the surface, this challenge would seem rather easy to withstand. While it may be inconvenient to those committed to particular theoretical models, there is strong empirical support for the notion that celebrity plays a role in politics, whether we consider the construction of political community and culture, raising awareness on issues, or engaging in electoral politics, either as a candidate or endorser. Even those who are chagrined by the development tend to not contest its existence. However, if we are to understand *when* athletes-turned-politicians succeed, we must delve more deeply into the relationship between celebrity and politics, attempting to determine *why* and *how* such a relationship might exist. While celebrity endorsements (ex. Clint Eastwood's speech on Mitt Romney's behalf at the 2008 GOP convention), issue based campaigns (ex. Angelina Jolie's work on African health issues), and electoral politics (ex. Ronald Reagan winning the Governorship of California and the Presidency of the United States) have been much discussed, what has been neglected, especially by political science, is how celebrity politics might build political community, potentially forming the foundation for the previously mentioned manifestations of celebrity politics.

That celebrity has become more prominent in politics, with people turning away from traditional media sources for guidance on political issues, is a sentiment not merely shared by West, Orman, and several other political scientists. For example, Thrall writes that, "...we predict a growing role for celebrities in American politics. Until recently, the major challenge for advocacy groups seeking change was wooing the media gatekeepers. These gatekeepers, constrained by government influence, the journalistic ethos of objectivity, and a historical role in the democratic process, enforced a definition of newsworthiness rarely met by celebrities. As the media continue to fragment, however, citizens increasingly act as their own gatekeepers, often relying on Web sites and search engines with no link to a journalistic tradition. Citizens, unlike the media gatekeepers, do not face such constraints and will be free to make choices using whatever personal preferences they hold. On balance, these choices will continue to lean more toward personalized and entertainment-oriented information." (Thrall et al 2008; 382)

Such a development is likely to continue, even accelerate, as young voters are increasingly likely to absorb political information in a relatively free range environment. Street speaks to the implications, noting that "[t]here is now a substantial body of research on the impact of popular culture on various aspects of the political process, from political knowledge to political engagement...while popular culture does act as a source of political knowledge and does serve to motivate feelings about the conduct of politics, it does not do so straightforwardly, but rather by way of the aesthetic and other judgments made by young people of the 'authenticity' and 'realism' of the sources of their cultural pleasure. This has policy implications for the attempt to re-engage young people in politics by means of popular culture and 'celebrity politics.'" (Street et al 2012; 338)



That this less circumscribed process and often indirect manner of engaging in politics is occurring is difficult to contest. As Thrall noted, “Throughout history, changes in the structure and functioning of the mass media have led to profound changes in the strategies used by political actors and the dynamics of public opinion. Just as the television age gave birth to new styles of politicking and governance (including celebrity activism), so, too, the emergence of the Internet and the increasing fragmentation of the mass media are giving rise to new forms of politics (Bimber 2003; Habermas 1992; Ranney 1985). That these new forms appear to require celebrities may amplify the dynamics identified by previous research. Thus we believe that the rise of political celebrity advocacy should be seen not (merely) as a sign of declining substance in American politics, but rather an indicator of a sea change in how politics works in the United States.” (Thrall et al 2008; 365)

The implications of this claim are profound, as they point to both 1) a different, less direct manner of “doing” politics becoming increasingly common, and 2) the inevitable emergence of such a form of politics, which might render normative arguments against celebrity politics impotent. Indeed, arguably all major political campaigns are conducted as forms of celebrity politics, treating candidates as “stars”. Thimsen explains in noting that “Political campaigns demand constant innovation in the use of media technology and attention to the current mechanisms of publicity. One need only turn on the news to realize how intensely political campaigns rely on traditional mechanisms of star building: carefully constructed childhood narratives, lifestyle interviews, glossy photo spreads, and visits to late-night television round out more traditional high-profile campaign stops and speeches, demonstrating the fascination with private life and

personality over public achievements that has been argued to characterize the nature of true celebrity.” (Thimsen 2010; 44)

Of course, not everyone agrees that the advancing influence of entertainment and celebrity in politics actually constitutes meaningful political activity. Robert Putnam, for example, is skeptical of the role which media sources such as television play in constructing political community, arguing that the effects might be outright corrosive for meaningful political engagement. (Putnam 2000, Street et al 2012; 338) While the normative implications for democracy will be examined in greater depth later in this chapter, the notion that entertainment television is devoid of political significance is a descriptive claim which will be addressed now. Fine (2012) does an outstanding job of pointing out the limitations of Putnam’s argument about the deleterious effects of popular culture and television on civil engagement and the formation of political community, insofar as it privileges formal, explicit organizational structures. In pointing to the importance of small, informal groups, Fine notes that, “...the small-groups approach to civic engagement is distinct from that of social capital theory (Woolcock 1998) in emphasizing the intrinsic value of groups... Thus, when it comes to bowling, the real issue for Putnam and others is not that individuals go to the lanes alone, but that there has been decline in the bowling leagues that once connected citizens who might not have otherwise known each other because of their different social networks... By providing a structure for affiliation and cohesion, groups offer both a model and a reason for participation in larger social domains. What one learns within the group context can be generalized to other domains; it becomes a resource that can be harnessed for public participation... At times these groups may be linked together in wispy communities...

fueled partially by the establishment of discursive worlds based on electronic communication.” (Fine 2012; 136-37) Indeed, “Rather than suggesting a decline in civil society, a proliferation of small groups without formal affiliations represents a healthy development in democratic societies.” (Fine 2012; 126-27)

Popular and celebrity culture possesses the capacity to form the basis of small, informal groups such as those described by Fine. Street explained, in arguing that “popular culture serves not only as a source of political knowledge, but also as a source of political morality....While these conversations may not refer directly to the institutions of liberal democratic politics, they do represent what Dahlgren (2009) describes as ‘proto-politics’, the preliminary insights of political comprehension...To label something as ‘entertainment’ has typically meant that it has no bearing on politics...But while politics may indeed be a serious business, it does not follow that it is unconnected to the world of entertainment. (Street et al 2012; 338-9) Such proto-politics need not occur within the confines of formal organizations or in the context of an explicitly political question; political engagement, deliberation, and community can be fomented, sometimes even enacted, on the basis of informal, small group discussions, which cross over into the political through the hermeneutic bridge of popular culture. Hay describes such settings, arguing such interactions thrive in settings as simple as ‘[c]onversations in a bar, pub, coffee shop, or whilst loading the dishwasher, or expletives directed at the latest news bulletin or an interview with a politician.” (Hay 2007; 75)

In understanding the influence of popular culture and celebrity on politics, one cannot simply wish it away; the emergence of new media platforms make it unlikely that one can put the genie back in the bottle. The implications will likely be profound for

democratic politics, as neo-“Imagined Communities” based on popular and celebrity culture, gain greater influence. Street explains as follows: “This process assumes political significance to the extent that it evokes an idea of ‘the people’ or, in Benedict Anderson’s words, an ‘imagined community.’ (Anderson, 1983) It also assumes political significance in raising the question of who represents the people, who can speak on their behalf. This question has emerged most starkly in recent years in discussion of the so-called celebrity politician (West and Orman, 2003; Street, 2004). Popular culture has supplied an ever-increasing number of stars who, in associating themselves with different causes, have represented themselves as speaking for ‘the people’... We need to consider the cognitive, affinitive and evaluative uses of popular culture in politics.” (Street et al 2012; 342) In the past, few political scientists have considered the role of celebrity and popular culture in American politics. As this section has made clear, there is “good reason to believe that popular culture matters politically, and that as we confront the problems of political participation, and media’s part in it, we need to look as carefully at entertainment as we do at news and current affairs.” (Street et al 2012; 355)

## ***2) Sports are not a significant part of celebrity culture***

Even if it is true that celebrity culture and spectacle have become a significant factor in politics, including at the electoral level, it does not necessarily mean that sports constitutes a significant factor in celebrity culture, nor that sports necessarily enjoys political influence in a manner similar to other forms of celebrity. The first part of this objection is addressed in the opening chapter, where numerous arguments are made about the rising influence of sports in celebrity culture, including those related to earning power and media exposure. What remains unexplained is why this has been the case. Most of

my arguments, at their core, ultimately revolve around the rapid rise in importance of sports, in myriad forms, as a source of media programming. Indeed, it “is difficult to overestimate the importance of media technology to the revolutionary change in American sports. To be sure, earlier innovations...altered the American sporting landscape. But now ‘[w]e are in the midst of a [new] media revolution,’ as [then] Myles Brand, president of the NCAA bluntly informed the delegates to the 2009 convention meeting in January.” (Rader 2009; 316)

The connectivity emerging media sources for sports and the viewing public is robust, based upon an interactivity which would have been unimaginable as recently as a quarter century ago. Consider the example of sports blogging. As Rader observed, “Sports blogging and twittering have also become fast-growing activities...Athletes themselves set up blogs; indeed, some observers believe that, because of the direct communication between athletes and their fans, the blogs and twittering have brought the two closer together...Blogging and twittering may also have also strengthened connections among the fans themselves.” (Rader 2009; 321) Previously, sports fans were limited in their communication to direct conversation in the public space or using the conventional media, via letters-to-the-editor of the newspaper or calling in during a radio show. Now fans are able to engage in discussions and debates with fans about their favorite teams and athletes on a 24/7/365 basis via blogging and other such internet-based options. Media outlets have worked dutifully to cultivate this level of interaction. Their motivations for this are obvious, as sports fans represent one of the most desirable demographics to reach. For example, in the case of fantasy leagues, “[f]or advertisers, fantasy sports appealed to especially to an otherwise difficult-to-reach but desirable

demographic group, men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, college-educated professionals, and men with household incomes averaging \$80,000 annually.”

(Rader 2009; 321)

In the service of this endeavor, sports have been carefully marketed to create story lines which attract viewers. As Andrews and Jackson explained, “Sports are customarily structured, marketed, mediated, and experienced, as contests between identifiable individuals (or groups of individuals) with whom the audience is expected to possess (or develop) some kind of affective attachment. As Whannel (Whannel 1998; 23) has noted, ‘Sport is presented largely in terms of star and narratives: the media narrativises the events of sport, transforming them into stories with stars and characters; heroes and villains.’ Or, in Lusted’s (Lusted 1991; 251) terms, if ‘Personalities are central to the institution of television’, they are even more central to the institution and era of televised sport.” (Andrews and Jackson 2001; 7) Such storylines aspire to become multi-generational, with sports affiliation being passed on with families and affinity networks, passed on in a manner similar to consumer brand preferences. Forney argues that they have succeeded, noting that, “in the United States... games generate inspirational power for individuals to move beyond the established limits of personal demeanor, an achievement of something new and seemingly unlimited with possibility. For better or worse, experiences of football, baseball, and basketball shape the lives of many millions, generation after generation, providing guidance for diverse dimensions of life.” (Forney 2007; 192)

Having considered how sports has risen to the level of celebrity influence they now enjoy, the question remains as to whether sports personalities can translate such

exposure into political influence in a manner consistent with other celebrity politicians. This question has been indirectly considered earlier in this chapter's discussion of the expectations and tools available to celebrities, with West and Orman (among others) concluding that sports functions similarly to other media-based celebrity. However, the question is worth briefly revisiting in the context of this discussion. The cross-branding of sports has allowed athletes to inspire familiarity and affinity commensurate with more traditional celebrities. As Zink observed, "[a]thletes, previously admired as one-dimensional figures that seldom appeared publicly outside of their respective sporting events, now frequently materialize in commercials and in cameos on sitcoms." (Zink 2003; 209) This increased scaling of sports has intersected with globalized marketing strategies to provide athletes with enormous influence. With this change, athletes-turned-politicians are able to "pierce the dividing line between status as an athlete, who is recognized primarily by fans of the sport, and the status of celebrity known to all." (Zink 2003; 209)

As a result, it is now "beyond any dispute that, athletes of all persuasions now have the capacity to win the attention of not millions but scores of millions within their own nations...Consequently, [sport] encompasses so many dimensions of experience involving politics, gender and class, that this is a "resonant moment", as sport seduces the modern world, for cultural historians [and other academics] as they consider the evolution of one of the most significant human experiences of the late twentieth century' (Morgan 1999; vii)." (Levermore and Budd 2004; xi) This has contributed to a situation where the American politics is increasingly seeing "former professional athletes cross over into public service. A multitude of factors contribute to this phenomenon – the

impression of being a winner, the immediate name recognition, and the personality that induces large numbers of people to follow, to name a few.” (Zink 2003; 208) As Tom McMillen, a former NBA player who was later elected to Congress in Maryland, observed, “[P]olitics now is more telegenic, more television driven. Notable athletes certainly have the door open to them...” (Zink 2003; 209)

### ***3) Sports are typical of celebrity culture***

A different objection to my theorizing presents itself as the opposite of the previous one; that sports is so typical of celebrity culture that my distinctions between the political influences at work are ultimately unsustainable, which might undercut my normative defense of the role of athletes-turned-politicians in a healthy democracy. Why do I believe that athletes can inspire voters in way that more traditional celebrities cannot? Having just made the argument in the previous section that sport enjoys the advantages of traditional celebrity, aren't I contradicting myself? Why would I distinguish a Bill Bradley or Jack Kemp from a Jesse Ventura or Arnold Schwarzenegger? For that matter, why am I not categorizing Ventura or Schwarzenegger as athletes-turned-politicians? These are serious questions and they will be considered in this section. My contention is that sports, in particular the “big three” sports identified by Forney – Football, Baseball, and Basketball (Forney 2007), enjoy a level of popularity in the United States which allows them to reap the benefits of traditional celebrity popularity. However, athletes in these major sports enjoy an added advantage over other typical media celebrities, that of authenticity.

Unlike actors who read from a script, competitive athletes do not perform with an outcome already determined. They will feel pressure and respond to it with no guarantee



of either success or failure. Their grace under pressure, in conjunction with the efforts of their opponents and the hand of fate, will determine the outcome. Indeed, “there is one crucial dimension in which sports differ markedly in their structure and texture from language, that arts, theater, music, and many other creative categories that so enrich human life: its unscriptedness. Indeed, this is absolutely essential to all modern sports, so much so that were the outcome of any predetermined, they would immediately lose the signifier of ‘sports’ and become theater, spectacle, or something else instead.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 47) Considerable support exists within the field of sociology to justify this claim. For example, “Rojek (2006, 2009) largely considers sports celebrities to be examples of ‘achieved celebrity’...Marshall (2006; 11) comments that ‘Sport is perhaps the transitional cultural activity in its mediated form that moves between the idea of the hero and the celebrity.’ Smart’s work (2005) is based on the premise that athletes are distinct as a group of celebrities in that their status is underpinned by authenticity.” (Malcolm 2012; 113) This distinction should not be underestimated. As Markovits and Rensmann argue, “The uncertainty of results is arguably *the* greatest difference between sports and related human activities that are very similar to sports, notably entertainment. The inviolability of sports’ unscriptedness provides one of the most essential common denominators for all modern sports languages. Any “scriptedness” is tantamount to cheating and the negation of any sport’s integrity. The most important ingredient of sport’s unscripted nature lies in the totally unexpected outcomes, best known as upsets.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 47)

The importance of authenticity is well recognized by the governing organizations of various sports; it can be seen in their responses to gambling scandals over the years.

The “Black Sox” scandal, which involved fixing the World Series in 1919, resulting in several players, including the legendary “Shoeless” Joe Jackson being banned from baseball for life. Even when found to be betting on their own teams, baseball has taken aggressive action against any involvement in gambling. Giants Manager Leo Durocher and all-time MLB hit leader Pete Rose faced substantial bans for such betting; Durocher for a year, Rose for life. College Basketball was fortunate to have survived the gambling scandals which rocked the Northeast during the early 1950s; such events served as an impetus to the creation and rise of the NCAA as a governing body for college sports. In recent years, when confronted with evidence that an NBA referee had been involved with gambling, the league moved swiftly to permanently cut all ties with the official. As an illustration of the concern regarding the “unscripted” nature of sports and gambling, consider the status of Las Vegas. It strains credibility to believe that lack of demand, rather than fear of the influence of gamblers, properly explains why none of the big three professional sports has ever allowed a franchise to be located in tourism mecca of Las Vegas.

In making this claim, I must account for the fact that professional sports has maintained popularity despite numerous steroid/performance enhancing drug related scandals in recent years. I believe that the use of such substances undoubtedly influences authenticity. I also believe that it does not do so in a manner which diminishes the combination of competition and sacrifice that is a core part of the enormous popularity of sports. Whereas match-fixing in the service of gamblers renders the match non-competitive as a result of players withholding effort or outright “tanking” their performance, reflecting a clear lack of desire to win, the use of performance enhancing

drugs represents an outsized and misplaced attempt to compete at a higher level. Simply stated, putting your body at risk by using a dangerous substance to improve performance is more consistent with a heroic narrative than taking money from gamblers to turn an event into a non-competition by withholding effort. In fact, “[a] 2004 ESPN.com poll revealed that nearly half of the American people (48.7 percent) said they would take steroids if it helped them make millions of dollars as a professional athlete.” (Rader 2009; 331) As long as the abuses are in the service of winning and/or maximizing the ability to compete, the public is likely to be forgiving. As Szymanski (unhappily) notes, “Modern sports are undoubtedly in a mess...If the old adage that sport is a mirror of society is true, then there is much that we should be ashamed to see. Yet sports have never been more popular that they are today. All of the abuses that we see are a consequence of our own intense desire to watch our own team, our own country, or our favored athlete win. We want to see excess, we want the contest to be taken to the ultimate limit, and we are willing to pay handsomely for it.” (Szymanski 2009; 180)

Returning now to the question of how I would distinguish a Bradley (a basketball star) or a Kemp (a former star quarterback in football) from a Ventura or a Schwarzenegger, it is ultimately about authenticity and the aspirational impulses which can potentially be accessed by athletes-turned-politicians. In the case of Jesse Ventura, professional wrestling, his entry into the world of celebrity, is – simply put – not a competitive sport. Although it involves tremendous athletic ability, that is not sufficient for it to constitute a competitive sport. As Markovits and Rensmann explained, “The World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) contestants engage in a physically exacting endeavor, probably much more so than their counterparts in Greco-Roman wrestling.

And yet, nobody regards the former as a sport precisely because its narrative is scripted, its outcome predetermined.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 47) Indeed, the scripted, over-the-top drama of professional wrestling ultimately mocks the ideals of competitive sports. As Brookes argued in reference to pro wrestling, “As in other sports, there is a set code of conduct to regulate acceptable versus unacceptable methods of combat...But in the case of wrestling the referee is frequently knocked out or distracted. Referees are verbally and even physically abused by commentators and wrestlers, and are also disciplined or dismissed by the company. Bouts are regularly won through illegal holds, or won as the result of blows meted out outside the ring, possibly by other wrestlers.” (Brookes 2002; 10)

The case of Arnold Schwarzenegger, who won the Governorship of California over the aptly named Grey Davis in a 2003 recall election, is less clear-cut than that of Ventura. Schwarzenegger initially gained national attention as a result of the successful 1977 documentary film, *Pumping Iron*, which featured him as a successful competitive body builder in the Mr. Olympia and Mr. Universe competitions. The movie built on a momentary uptick in the public visibility of bodybuilding, which was frequently shown on the somewhat popular niche NBC program, *The Wide World of Sports*. However, Schwarzenegger did not attain anything approaching mainstream popularity until he became a professional actor, starring in such blockbuster movies as *Conan the Barbarian*, *Commando*, *Predator*, and the *Terminator* series. These movies enjoyed viewership exponentially larger than *Pumping Iron* and appear to be the most likely explanation for Schwarzenegger’s immense public notoriety. Similarly, Ventura enjoyed a significant movie career, including acting with Schwarzenegger in *Predator*. Ventura’s acting

career in both the movies and professional wrestling present a more likely explanation for his notoriety than any claim to success in an actual competitive sport.

The authenticity enjoyed by athletes-turned-politicians offers a significant advantage relative to other celebrity politicians. Andrews and Jackson (2001) distinguish between athletic celebrity and other forms of celebrity in three ways: “1) because sport is deemed to be fundamentally meritocratic, sport stars are argued to be ‘worthy’ of fan adulation; 2) because sport has a social prominence and a link to nationhood that gives these celebrities a heightened presence and affection; 3) because sport stars have an appearance of authenticity that those in other genres cannot match.” (Malcolm 2012; 108)

Such is the power of sporting events that they are often treated as a balm for national tragedies. As Tomlinson noted, “...the collective dimensions of sport and leisure remain extraordinary...Many sports, for instance, create that momentary public sphere in which you can feel bound to strangers...After September 11, New Yorkers followed the valiant progress of the New York Yankees that season with a reciprocal empathy. Resuming sport fixtures was heralded as “a potent symbol of recovery from the attacks”...At a time of such tragedy, shock, and grief, the sport setting and encounter provided a key symbolic collective context for the expression of national feeling.” (Tomlinson 2005; 230-1) Similarly, in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, the city was clearly galvanized by their Red Sox and the Bruins. Moments such as the crowd spontaneously singing the national anthem at the next Bruins game, one of the victims throwing out the first pitch at the next Red Sox game, and David Ortiz’s heart felt (and somewhat profane) speech to the Fenway Park crowd, illustrate the bonding, community-building potential of sports.

It is the presence of authenticity and unpredictability, alongside community building, which has driven the popularity of sport in contemporary celebrity culture. That is why media outlets have been willing to pay enormous sums of money to gain access to live sports programming. “Dramatic sporting moments,” according to Brookes, “justify the ever-higher price that broadcasters are prepared to pay for covering major competitions, not just in order to generate revenue through advertising and pay-TV, but also to gain or retain prestige. Multinational corporations are prepared to pay increasingly hefty fees to be associated with such events.” (Brookes 2002; 27)

It is my belief that in answering these two challenges concerning the connection between sport and celebrity that I have established ample reason to theorize that while athletes-turned-politicians might enjoy the advantages of traditional celebrity, they are often able to avoid some of the limitations normally associated with the political activation of that celebrity. Due to the authenticity, unpredictability, and community building aspects of sports, they may represent a form of celebrity especially ripe for conversion into political influence.

#### ***4) Sports celebrity impedes effective representative and deliberative democracy***

Theoretically, elections should be won by candidates who maintain an optimal alignment with the issue interests of a particular constituency, conditioned by certain structural advantages positively associated with incumbency or experience. However, it seems undeniable that there have been periods in American history when confidence in elected officials has been low, where symbolic political impulses have become ascendant in elections. Such a *symbolic politics* has often assumed a *descriptive* form, often involving voting for (or against) a candidate based on some immutable identity trait (such

as race, ethnicity, or gender). On other occasions, symbolic politics has assumed a *rejective* form. Frustration with current government structures and candidates can result in a symbolic politics of rejection, sweeping into office political amateurs to send a signal of disapproval toward government. Finally, on some occasions, symbolic politics assumes an *aspirational* form, where the candidates elected to office embody some of the character traits we most desire in our leaders.

Celebrity politics tends to reside in the realm of symbolic politics. This, as West and other critics have claimed, has often assumed a *rejective* form. However, on other occasions, celebrity politics might assume an *aspirational* form. Such a form of symbolic politics may not deserve the same level of criticism or concern as other forms of symbolic politics, as it implies a sense of agency which should distinguish it from a politics of rejection. Aspirational politics may represent a turn from voting for those who are like us (descriptive), or against someone or something (rejective), to voting for candidates who embody the traits we would like to see among our leaders, or society writ large (aspirational).

My contention is that athletes-turned-politicians are much more likely to tap into an aspirational impulse than other forms of celebrity, mitigating the sting of many democracy-based criticisms of celebrity politics. This is due in part to the authenticity of competitive sports and the athletes who compete in them. Recognizing the importance of authenticity is important to accurately understanding the full range of political rationality. Street notes that, "...the phenomenon of the celebrity politician takes on, I would suggest, a different aspect. It is not to be dismissed as a betrayal of the proper principles of democratic representation, but as an extension of them...Rather than siding with those

who bemoan the ‘personalisation’ of politics, Corner argues (2000, 401) that the individual political figure serves to ‘condense “the political”’ for those who they represent...The logic of this is adopted by P. David Marshall (1997), who writes...that the existence of politicians as celebrities has to be understood as part of the process of filling out political rationality to include affective relationships, as well as the instrumental ones...Put differently, all politicians are celebrity politicians, only some are more convincing, more ‘authentic’ performers than others.” (Street 2004; 445-46) This is not meant to argue that policy based calculations are not, or should not, be part of making a rational political choice for an elected official. However, “...while such issues are indeed important to the representative-represented relationship, they do not exhaust its character or content.” (Street 2004; 444)

Even if the explanatory potential of this theorized aspirational political impulse does not ultimately prove compelling, more conventional arguments abound for how celebrity politics provide numerous benefits to a healthy democracy. For example, celebrity politicians can increase public exposure to policy issues which would otherwise go unconsidered by the general public, as well as function as a check on elite domination of political space. Marsh explained that “[c]elebrity-led debate can also educate segments of society on public issues about which they would otherwise remain ignorant...In addition, while celebrities and the media may simplify complex political debate in a way that concerns the ‘chattering classes,’ such simplification may make the issues more accessible to the less politically knowledgeable and interested. Celebrity politics may thus provide an unorthodox, but potentially effective, way of breaking the hold of established elites on political agendas and public discourse about policy.



Celebrities have a unique capacity to reach out to and mobilise otherwise apathetic publics...” (Marsh et al 2010; 333) Moreover, sports has the unique ability to impart values essential to civil society; tolerance and, by extension, democracy. Allison argued that sport can “...be an important component of civil society... there is a distinctively sporting contribution to civil society, based on sporting values. These values would include the importance of competing while retaining respect for opponents, the ability to express and suppress individual talents and ambitions within a team, the acknowledgment that there is something – the good of the game – beyond our immediate ambitions and an ultimate willingness to accept authority...” (Allison 1998; 714)

Sports can also impact democracy by providing a setting for social networks which function in a manner consistent with the small group bonding and social capital development described earlier in this chapter by both Fine and Street. Further analysis on this point is offered by Digel, who wrote “...democracies cannot flourish without the feeling of solidarity, without our willingness to put others again and again into a position that is more or less equal to our own, even though this may cost us a share of our own political prosperity.... Social networks are of central importance for the psychosocial well being of man. Sports can be considered as social networks, often providing emotional support, assisting in the growth of self-esteem and in offering practical daily help... Bourdieu talks about our social capital in this context. A part of this will be that the sports club or venue is seen as a place like home. It has to be a place of successful communication and socialization.... Social networks form a kind of escort among social dangers—they can be viewed as social cushions.... Therefore, socio-political programmes to promote networks are indispensable.” (Digel 2010; 3035-36)

Of course, if one insists on comparing celebrity influenced democracy to an ideal-type conception of democracy, the role of celebrities will always be considered a negative factor. However, as I argued earlier in the chapter, that is not the choice we are confronting. The media world has been figuratively flattened and democratized by recent technological innovations, removing longstanding political gatekeepers from traditional roles at major news outlets. As a result people can decide more readily for themselves what they will factor into their political calculations at election time, resulting in an enhanced role for popular culture and symbolic politics. Unless one believes that the clock can be turned back to a mythical time of pure deliberative, policy driven debate, the present reality will have to be reckoned with, warts and all. Bennett noted that, "...the sheer consistency and scale of impact that the celebritisation of politics has on elections, should not merely be 'dismissed as an erosion of politics, but must be viewed within the framework of a change in political aesthetics in which there will be positive and negative outcomes.'" (Bennett 2011; 86)

Regarding sports in particular, Whannel pointed out that "Shankly...famously said that 'Football is not a matter of life and death – it's far more important than that'. There can be no more pithy a reminder that we should never regard popular culture as epiphenomenal or marginal – it remains a central element in the political process. It constitutes a meeting ground between popular common sense and organised political discourse, and for that reason alone, it is vital that we continue subjecting it to analysis and critique." (Whannel 1983; 236-7) Ultimately, the harshest critics of celebrity politics can no longer afford to simply ignore it; instead we must all figure out how it can best harness it to enhance democracy. Even West, in his 2010 article, grudgingly

conceded that confronting our broken political system requires “examin[ing] new ways of establishing a media dialogue with broader audiences about policy costs and benefits, including taking advantage of celebrities and entertainment-based activism.” (West 2010; 6-7)

***5) Sports is a poor venue for political community, as it is implicated in violence and discrimination***

A longstanding criticism of spectator sports is that the passions involved in major events risk outbreaks of violence, both at home and in the streets. For example, it has often been claimed that Super Bowl Sunday is the day when domestic violence is most commonly committed in the United States. However, as is the case in many of the violence-based criticisms of sports, such claims are not supported by empirical data. In the case of domestic violence, recent studies indicate that sports is not an especially strong or unique trigger for such attacks. Gantz’s study suggested that “...the relationship is complex and nonlinear. Those seeking a stimulus-response type link between football and domestic violence will not find unequivocal support in these data....On occasion, televised sports can trigger an ugly and violent confrontation between spouses...Domestic violence as well as simmering resentments are far from the norm. Fortunately for all involved, domestic violence triggered by televised football (or, for that matter, other sports) appears to be rare.” (Gantz et al 2006; 379-80)

Mass violence at sporting events has unquestionably been a problem in many nations around the world, particularly at soccer matches between national or regional rivals. However, it would be a mistake to analogize violence in international soccer to potential violence at sporting events in the United States. In arguing for differing circumstances, Markovits and Rensmann note that, “By contrast to all of these European

cases, violence is a very marginal occurrence in present-day American sports culture...Moreover, the rare cases of fan violence that have existed in America—and will always remain in any context in which large numbers of people gather for emotionally charged events in a relatively small and confined space—have had a completely different substance and tone from their European counterparts. Thus, violence at American sports venues has almost never been a premeditated, organized activity, implemented by a small group of well-trained street fighters whose primary, perhaps sole, purpose is to engage in fights and cause havoc rather than to watch the game.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 251-252) At least three reasons exist for this difference. First, the presence of multiple major sports in the United States “spread a fan’s emotional involvement and allegiances over three, possibly four, teams, thus easing the pain and frustration associated with a lost game.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 260)

Second, U.S. sports violence is rarely, if ever, premeditated and planned, unlike in Europe, where it virtually always is so. This second distinction is intertwined with the third; that U.S sports violence is almost invariably celebratory in nature. Markovits and Rensmann explains the distinction, noting that, “...where virtually all of the violence in the stadiums is premeditated, prepared, and designed well before the actual games, “celebratory violence” at American venues occurs spontaneously and in an improvised and ad-hoc fashion. Above all, these riots are not directed against the fans of the opposing teams, as much as they are random acts of destruction against whatever constitutes their immediate surroundings...Jerry M. Lewis, author of one of the most comprehensive studies of fan violence in North American sports, summarizes the situation: ‘For North America, and particularly the United States, the data on fan violence

at the collegiate and professional levels of competition are clear. The typical rioter is likely to be a young, white male celebrating a victory after a championship or an important game or match.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 254-255)

Whereas the violence based objections to a political culture which embraces the aspirational potential of sports have been relatively easily dismissed, much more nettlesome are questions of whether sports is a positive or negative force as regards racial and gender discrimination. In the case of gender, it is telling that female sports teams have been unable to garner the same level of support as their male counterparts. It is also notable that no sportswomen of significance have won election to a major political office in the United States. Indeed, “[s]ports politicians so far have been almost all male. However, the passage of Title IX and the resulting encouragement of women’s athletes suggests that in future years there may emerge greater gender diversity in the system of sports celebrityhood.” (West and Orman 2003; 79) As a result, it would seem premature to cement any judgments about the political potential of sports in regards to gender.

Unlike the case of gender, there exists no shortage of literature and empirical data on the issue of sports, race, and politics. However, due to the complexity and competing impulses involved in the debate, efforts to find a comprehensive and final explanation of the relationships are likely to be elusive. There is a strong literature base which cautions against regarding sport as a pathway toward transcending destructive racial stereotypes. Carrington, one of the most respected scholars in the field, in surveying the most insightful critiques, “cites Stuart Hall’s (1998) discussion of the role of black athletes in the (re)imagination of the national community. He further mentions bell hooks’s (2004) analysis of the relationship between sport (and Mike Tyson in particular) and the

generation of ideas of black masculinity, and of the commodification of contemporary black athletes that strips them of their radical potential (in contrast to predecessors such as Jack Johnson and Joe Louis).” (Malcolm 2012; 62) However, “perhaps the most significant sociology of sport and race publication, and certainly the most controversial in recent years, is John Hoberman’s *Darwin’s Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (1997)...Hoberman argues that the cult of black athleticism continues the tradition of emphasizing the physical superiority of blacks...Concomitant with ideas of black physical superiority, were and are beliefs that white dominance stemmed from mental superiority relative to blacks.... Hoberman argues that African Americans have bought into the collective fantasy of physical difference, basking in the symbolism of black athletes’ victories over whites.... Athletic success leads to peer-group pressures that ridicule black academic achievement and fosters a culture of anti-intellectualism...Critics argued that Hoberman was out of touch with the lived reality of African-American youths and pathologized black communities through his portrayal of anti-intellectualism.” (Malcolm 2012; 60-1)

While racially based objections to the prominence of sports in society undoubtedly make an important contribution to the debate, I am not convinced that they provide a final answer to the question. Carrington recognized the double-edged sword which sport constitutes on racial issues, noting that “sport becomes an essential space for challenging racial assumptions and provides a means to redefine the Other. However, Carrington acknowledges that although sport does provide a defined space for Others to challenge white hegemony it in turn allows for the gaze of the black body as an object of desire and contrast for whites.” (McDuffie 2011; 500) Guttman joins Carrington in

seeing the potential for racial tolerance to emerge from the popularity of sports, arguing that, “[w]e must maximize the positive potentiality of representational sport and make the most of sport’s propensity for bringing people together...If we really *need* to feel represented by athletes, we might think of them not as black or white or Protestant or Catholic or Russian or American but as men and women whose performances help existentially to define what it means to be human.” (Guttman 1986; 185)

The argument for the transformative nature of sports regarding race is made especially well by Markovits and Rensmann. They note that, “American sports have emerged over time into a particularly powerful medium for broadly inclusive cultural, social, and national integration that cuts across class divisions and increasingly transcends ethnic conflicts. In doing so, American sports have functioned as an integrative substitute for other forms of social (welfare) mechanisms. With the disproportionate success of minority athletes in America’s hegemonic sports culture, sports have turned into a major model that facilitates exposure to cosmopolitan diversity and enhances broader recognition of ethnic and cultural multiplicity in American immigrant society.” (Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 256-257) Much as contact theory explained the importance of integration of the military during World War II as a tool to start breaking down particularly odious forms of racism, sports competitions can compel fans to come to grips with the fact that their on-field heroes might look physically nothing like them at all. Ultimately, “...the stardom of African Americans in the sports world, as exemplified by basketball stars like Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan or golf legend Tiger Woods, helped expand the social acceptance of blacks and thus constituted

the precursors to Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and eventually Barack Obama.”  
(Markovits and Rensmann 2010; 263-4)

While it would be unreasonable to promote the idea of athletes-turned-politicians based primarily upon their ability to reverse centuries of racism, it would be at least as unreasonable to conclude that, on-balance, sports have constituted a negative force for racial advancement in the United States. However, whether we are contemplating a white child in Texas trying to imitate Willie Mays in front of his racist family, or considering African-American former athletes who have been elected, sometime quite improbably, to political office, it is difficult to shake the notion that sports at least assists in slowly chipping away at some of the barriers to racial equality in our nation.



## CHAPTER THREE – THE CASE OF MAYOR DAVE BING OF DETROIT

Over the past century, Detroit has retained significance as an American city in ways which transcend simple population levels. Whether considering the more than half-century long industrial boom in the city, Detroit's imposing challenges relating to race relations, or the rich culture of the city's music and sports traditions, Detroit resonates in the popular imagination like few other American cities. As longtime *Detroit Free-Press* columnist Tom Walsh noted, "Detroit matters. People around the world know what Detroit is, or think they know what it is or means. It stands for something in ways that most other cities [don't]." (1) In its rise, fall, and potential for rebirth, it represents for many both a metaphor and harbinger for industrial cities throughout the United States.

In 1910, Detroit's population was just over 700,000 as Henry Ford plotted to expand demand and increase profits for his automobile company. Ford famously offered \$5 a day to autoworkers, (2) creating a strong and content workforce that also became an important part of a reliable customer base for his cars. Ford also pushed for the nation's first freeway, to make it easier for his employees to get to and from work. (3) Detroit also became home, in 1954, to the nation's first outdoor suburban shopping centers. (4) Detroit, a city which rapidly became devoted to making of the automobile, was also a city which embraced car culture, with important demographic implications for how the city and suburbs were to grow in the coming decades.

The attractiveness of those good assembly line jobs helped spark an influx of southern blacks to Detroit. (5) As incomes rose for black families, and the dream of an automobile purchase became a reality, many hoped to move to Detroit's beautiful and spacious suburbs. However, those dreams were often rebuffed by emergent and powerful "neighborhood associations," of which nearly 200 were founded in Detroit between 1943 and 1965. Those organizations "fiercely guarded the investments their members had made in their homes," which translated into widespread, often violent, racial exclusion. (6) As a result, Detroit's black residents tended to reside within the city limits, as white families increasingly moved into the suburbs.

Over time, as was the case in many major cities, the flight of tax revenues to suburban communities, among other economic pressures, stirred the pot of racial animosity until it reached a boiling point. However, in the case of Detroit, that boiling point represented one of the most notorious race riots in American history. In 1967, a riot erupted when the police conducted a violent raid on a predominantly black saloon in the early morning hours of July 23rd. Over the next four days, 43 people were killed, over 1000 injured, and over 7000 people were arrested. Michigan Governor George Romney was so concerned that he mobilized over a thousand National Guardsmen and convinced President Lyndon Johnson to deploy Paratroopers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division on the streets of Detroit. (7)

In the aftermath of the riots, it was unsurprising Detroit's relatively liberal Mayor, Jerome Cavanagh, was replaced by a law-and-order candidate in the next election. Despite efforts to tighten policing in the city, the flow of white families moving to the suburbs transformed into a flood. Interestingly, among those abandoning downtown was

a decidedly non-white family; that of Dave Bing, a young basketball player with the NBA's Detroit Pistons, who had just finished his rookie season with the team. (8)

Dave Bing was born in 1943 in Washington D.C., not Detroit, the city he adopted as home later in life. He grew up in a one-story home in one of the poorest sections of the nation's capital. His parents, Hasker and Juanita, had to work hard to support their four children; he as a handyman/construction worker and she as a domestic, cleaning houses and babysitting. (9) When Bing was five years old, he built a play "horse" out of pieces of wood. While playing on it, he fell and a protruding nail penetrated his eye. His family, unable to pay for surgery, had to allow it to heal on its own. Although he was lucky that it had not cleanly pierced the cornea, he was left with permanently blurry vision in his left eye. (10) Perhaps because it occurred at such a young age, Bing continued to go about his childhood seemingly untraumatized by the injury. (11)

Bing's upbringing was strongly influenced by religion. His Sunday's were all day church-driven affairs, including services and "Sunday School classes, followed by large family dinners that included much of Bing's extended family – relatives who lived nearby or neighbors who became close friends." (12) The value of hard work was also imparted early on to Bing by his father; the boy had worked several jobs by the time he was a teenager. Bing explained that, "Working was mandatory in our household as kids...If you weren't in school or involved in church activities, you were working." (13) Work was also at the core of the boy's maturation when his father received a severe concussion in a church construction accident, an injury which was to be debilitating for the rest of Hasker's life. In his father, the boy had known a "sense of reliability and

stability that Bing could always count on no matter what. But now he saw a vulnerability that he once thought unimaginable.” (14)

As was the case with many boys of his era who came from hardscrabble urban families, Bing found an important outlet in the world of sports. The Watts Branch area of Washington D.C. in which Bing grew up was overwhelming poor and largely black, which spared Bing from much of the violence which was afflicting America in the late 1950's. (15) One of Bing's close friends on the basketball court was Marvin Gaye, who would go on to international fame as a singer with Motown Records. (16) Bing went on to follow in the footsteps of future NBA legend Elgin Baylor at Spingarn High School, playing a significant role in raising the profile of D.C. prep basketball on the national sports landscape. (17) Bing was also an outstanding student; one of his proudest accomplishments at the time was to have been named to an athletic-academic All-American team during his senior year. (18) Bing was also considered one of the top high school baseball players in the nation's capital. In fact, according to Bing, “By the time I was in high school...I was a better baseball player than I was a basketball player. But I had to look at it from a business standpoint, if you will. It really didn't matter how much I loved playing baseball; there weren't any full-ride baseball scholarships out there that would get me to college. I had to make a choice right then. I had better concentrate on my basketball game because that would probably take me farther.” (19)

Dave Bing accepted the offer of a basketball scholarship to attend Syracuse University. During his recruiting visit, his student hosts were football All-Americans John Mackey and Ernie Davis, two of the relatively few black males attending Syracuse at the time. They were bracingly honest with him during his visit, which occurred

relatively early in the recruiting cycle. The early interest from Syracuse and the forthrightness of Mackey and Davis impressed Bing, who decided to commit to the Orangemen, despite late interest from some of the top college basketball programs in the nation. (20)

Syracuse University turned out to be a good fit for Bing. He made lifelong friends on the basketball team, including future Hall of Fame coach Jim Boeheim, who claimed of Bing, “He was a great player, one of the best I’ve ever seen...Off the court he was a tremendous leader, a guy people would naturally follow.” (21) As a player, Bing was immediately among the best in the country. In his debut season, he averaged over 22 points per game and led the Orangemen to their first postseason appearance in seven seasons. At the end of that season, Bing married his high school sweetheart, Aaris, and they had their first child, Cassaundra, a year later, in 1965. During his remaining time at Syracuse, Bing continued to excel. In his senior year he averaged an eye-popping 28.4 points, 6.6 assists, and over ten rebounds a game; a number unheard of for a point guard. Bing also led the Orangemen to the NCAA tournament, where they ultimately bowed out in a loss to the Duke Blue Devils. (22) That season, Bing finished fifth in the nation in scoring and was Syracuse’s first consensus member of the basketball All-American team in almost forty years. Bing also became a father for the second time that year; again to a daughter, Aleisha.

Despite his accomplishments at Syracuse, Bing entered the NBA draft uncertain as to which team he might end up joining. This was in part because the 1966 NBA draft would be the first that would be undertaken based not on territorial considerations, but instead based inversely on the record of the team in the previous season. Under the

previous rules, the Detroit Pistons would have been guaranteed the rights to University of Michigan All-American Cazzie Russell, who was generally considered to be the most desirable player among that year's seniors. However, under the new rules, the New York Knicks would have the top pick in the draft, which they happily used to pluck Russell from the Pistons, leaving Detroit fans to fume and claim to be the victim of a league-wide conspiracy to keep the most talented players in the biggest markets. (23) Instead, Detroit was left with the second pick in the draft, which was at best a consolation prize to its aggrieved fans. Even though the Pistons were in need of a point guard like himself, Bing was uncertain as to whether Detroit would select him with their pick. As *Detroit Free-Press* sports writer Drew Sharp noted, "Historically, NBA teams didn't draft black point guards as high as second overall...there was an unwritten rule that black athletes weren't capable of excelling at the positions demanding the flexing of their intellectual muscles." (24) However, the Pistons stepped up and took Bing with the second pick in the 1966 NBA draft. With that pick came a lucrative contract, but also very high expectations to justify that lofty selection.

The Pistons were part of the NBA "old guard," having entered the league back in 1948, when the team played in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The owner of the team, Bill Davidson, was the head of a family consortium which would own the team for over forty years. (25) Although Davidson had reservations about drafting Bing, that decision was soon vindicated when Bing won the NBA Rookie of the Year award in 1967. The very next season, he became the leading scorer in the league. (26) Bing accomplished all of this in spite of the fact that he played the game with blurry vision in his left eye. At first, former teammate Willie Norwood, a rookie at the time, couldn't figure out why Bing

wouldn't pass him the ball on the fast break, until he realized that he had been running on the left hand side of the court. Eventually Norwood, a future Detroit businessman, realized what the problem was; "He just couldn't see me... The next time, I went down the right side, and I got my first dunk." (27)

Bing went on to have an extraordinary NBA career, making the NBA All-Star Game seven times, winning election to the Basketball Hall of Fame, and being named one of the top 50 NBA Players of All-Time. (28) His career accomplishments became even more unbelievable in light of a serious injury to his right eye in 1971, when the Los Angeles Lakers Harold "Happy" Hairston accidentally poked Bing with his finger. Bing's retina was partially torn, requiring emergency surgery in order to avoid permanent vision loss. Bing came back from the surgery, having to relearn himself how to shoot a basketball with altered sightlines, to be named the Most Valuable Player of the NBA All-Star Game in 1976. (29) Unsurprisingly, Bing's NBA peers were deeply impressed with the quality of his character. He was awarded the J. Walter Kennedy Citizenship Award by the NBA and at his Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, NBA legend and rival Oscar Robertson observed, "Dave is the perfect example of professionalism, class, dignity, and humanity. He cares. He gets involved with the world." (30)

Bing played for the Pistons for ten years, before finishing out his NBA career with short stints with the Washington Bullets and Boston Celtics, retiring in 1978. Unusual among NBA players, Bing "had become a voracious reader during the long road trips NBA players must endure. During his offseason... he worked in Detroit for a bank, the Chrysler Corporation and a small steel company, teaching himself finance and deal-making." (31) Famously, when "a Detroit bank wouldn't grant him a loan to buy a new

home after his rookie season with the Pistons in 1967, he didn't picket in front of the bank, which would have ensured him a moment on the 11 o'clock news. Instead, he got a job at that bank to better understand the nuances of the lending process. He started out as a teller and worked up to branch manager." (32) Moreover, his decade in Detroit had won the city Bing's heart; although he lived in the suburbs, Bing wanted to start a business and he wanted to do it in his adopted city of Detroit.

At the end of the 1970's, Detroit was no longer the industrial titan of the foregone Ford era. Although it was still a powerful economic force, a combination of competition from foreign automobile companies and complications from the cities painful racial history had made it a much less attractive target for investment. In the aftermath of the 1967 riots, Police Chief Roman Gribbs was elected Mayor of Detroit. Gribbs implemented the controversial STRESS program, an acronym for "Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets," which involved decoy operations and strong use of force. Opposition to that program was the focus of Coleman Young's mayoral campaign in 1973, where he sought to become Detroit's first black mayor. (33). Young won election and went on to serve five terms as Mayor of the city.

To call Coleman Young a controversial political figure is to embody understatement. As *Detroit Free-Press* columnist Drew Sharp observed, "There was little indifference regarding Coleman Young. Either you liked that he was a foul-mouthed fighter for the long oppressed or you loathed him as a power-mad bigot who saw basically every executive decision through a stark racial prism. However, friend and foe alike generally gave Young high marks for the gradual revitalization of a long dormant downtown Detroit; this was accomplished through three significant business and



entertainment development projects within a 10-year span—the Renaissance Center at the riverfront...the Cobo Center expansion, and the construction of Joe Louis Arena. Young may have been crude and occasionally crooked, but area business leaders were comfortable working with him.” (34) By the fall of 1992, Young had decided that he was not going to run for reelection and his thoughts turned to the possibilities for his successor. He quickly narrowed the field down to two potential candidates, one of whom was the fiery Marxist defense attorney Ken Cockrel Sr. Young loved that Cockrel was unafraid of confrontation and knew that his solidly left wing politics would play very well with Detroit’s post-white flight voters. However, Cockrel was not Young’s first choice. Coleman Young’s first choice to succeed him as Mayor was Dave Bing. (35)

Dave Bing had not stood idle, living off his NBA earnings, in the almost fifteen years since he had retired as a professional basketball player. Bing had spent his off-seasons preparing for his life after basketball and he had decided that the steel industry would be his next challenge. Bing had worked what was functionally an internship in the steel industry at Paragon Steel, which was also owned by Detroit Pistons owner Bill Davidson, for two years and felt that he was ready to strike out on his own. (36) The steel industry was not considered a ripe opportunity at the time. Although U.S. Steel had become America’s first billion-dollar corporation, the industry leaders had hubristically ignored emerging competition, both in the U.S. and abroad. Many considered the industry to be, economically speaking, on its deathbed. Bing, however, thought he had spotted an opportunity to introduce himself into the process as an essential “middleman,” with the potential to amass great profits and create jobs in large numbers. What he needed was investment capital. He began by putting up \$80,000 of his own funds. Tapping into

Coleman Young's business connections, he brought in Emmett Moten as a major investor. In addition, he leveraged his banking contacts into a \$250,000 business loan and convinced Senator Bill Bradley, a former NBA colleague, to help steer federal money earmarked for minority business startups his direction. (37) By 1980, Bing Steel was open for business.

Initially, Bing was frustrated by how he was treated by the business community, noting that, "You had to deal with the B.S. that all of us former athletes were simply dumb and lazy." (38) His confidence was not helped by a first year of larger than anticipated losses. Bing claimed that his time in professional sports prepared him for that moment of doubt, noting that, "We knew we were going to struggle during that first year...But I could draw on my experiences as a rookie in the NBA...You can't get discouraged. It's like missing a shot or losing a game. There's always the next shot...When you're an athlete, you're accustomed to not accepting setbacks." (39) In the second year, Bing Steel turned the corner, taking in more than \$4 million in sales. By 1984, the White House was calling; Bing was to be honored as the National Minority Small Businessman of the Year in a ceremony in the Rose Garden. Sadly, Hasker Bing had passed away the year before, denying him the chance to see his son honored at the White House. However, the honor meted out by President Reagan made Bing an instant "A" list celebrity in Detroit, with local politicians rushing to curry his favor. (40)

As Bing enjoyed increasing financial success, he did not take his adopted city of Detroit for granted. For example, in 1989, when he learned that Detroit public schools planned to cancel their varsity sports programs, he vowed to raise the necessary funds for the school district. Not only did he donate \$250,000 of his own funds, but he planned a

fundraiser which netted another \$150,000 for the high school athletes. (41) As another example, in 1986, upon learning that Coleman Young was interested in bringing a second NBA team to Detroit, playing in downtown Detroit rather than the Auburn Hills suburbs, Bing leapt into action. Forming a partnership with NHL Detroit Red Wings owner Mike Ititch, Bing made a run at purchasing the Milwaukee Bucks, with the intent of moving them to Detroit. Although NBA commissioner David Stern was reportedly tremendously enthusiastic about bringing in Bing as the first black owner of a major U.S. sports franchise, the bid fell just short of success. (42) In light of such actions, it is perhaps not as surprising as one might initially presume that Young sought out Bing to replace him as Mayor of Detroit in 1992. Just before Christmas, Young met with Bing, promising to throw his full political support behind the former Piston star. When Bing declined, Young asked why. Bing answered, "I have 1,000 people who are entrusted to me at the company...I can't abandon them. I have a responsibility to them, and I don't have succession plan in place right now what would afford me the opportunity to pursue such interests." Mayor Young reportedly answered, "Goddamn! That's absolutely the right answer." (43)

With Bing out of the race, Michigan State Supreme Court Justice Dennis Archer won the mayoral election, taking office in 1993. Archer served two terms before leaving office in 2001. His campaign promised a more intellectual and deliberative style, coupled with policies more friendly to the business community. However, Archer was not a creature of Detroit and, after early failures on controversial casino issues, he lacked the political ability to wring concessions from local unions, recognized by virtually everyone as being necessary to address Detroit's long term problems. By the end of his

second term, according to columnist Tom Walsh, Archer “just kind of said ‘this isn’t fun anymore,’” and he declined to run again, (44) deciding to instead serve as the President of the American Bar Association. Meanwhile, Bing Steel diversified into the Bing Group, with Black Enterprise magazine naming the conglomerate the eight largest black owned business in the United States in 1998, employing over 1000 minority workers. (45) At the height of its success, the Bing Group was bringing in \$300 million a year in revenue. (46)

With Archer declining to run for reelection, 2001 saw the election of Kwame Kilpatrick as Mayor of Detroit. Kilpatrick came from a politically successful family; his mother represented Michigan in the U.S. House of Representatives for over a decade and his father was a Wayne County executive. (47) The former middle school teacher was elected to the Michigan House of Representatives while in his mid-20’s and became Detroit’s youngest elected Mayor at the age of 31. (48) The charismatic young Kilpatrick, who was christened “America’s Hip-Hop Mayor” by comedian Chris Rock, (49) entered the Mayor’s office with his rhetorical guns blazing, arguing that whites had abandoned the city and proclaiming that he would crack down on crime in the 8 mile area of town. (50) Bing had endorsed Kilpatrick in his campaign (51) and the young Mayor immediately turned to the respected former Piston star for help.

Although Kilpatrick did not lack political and social connections in Michigan, his contacts in the business community were virtually non-existent. Early on in his administration, he decided he wanted to submit a bid to host the Democratic National Convention in Detroit. According to Walsh, Kilpatrick picked “up the phone and calls Bill Ford, the CEO at Ford, and Rick Wagner, the CEO of General Motors...he doesn’t

even know the guy(s). They don't even know the new Mayor yet. And he picks up the phone and says you are going to be my host committee and they said, 'No, we're not.' And it's like, oh really? Like he's smoking from the pipe of dreams..." (52) Ultimately, Kilpatrick was able to convince Bing to take on the position in a failed effort to bring the DNC to the Motor City. (53) When Kilpatrick took on the issue of neighborhood renovation, he created a program called "Next Neighborhoods," with a committee of civic leaders to showcase the initiative. As Walsh noted, "he puts this group together, and here's this big committee, and Dave Bing is going to be the Co-Chair. And Dave didn't know about it until Kwame had him in the room. But he didn't bitch about it...he was sort of the business community face for Kwame." (54)

Although Kilpatrick enjoyed some successes in his first term on riverfront development issues, (55) by the time he was midway through his second term, what had been whispered rumors of improprieties in the Mayor's office had developed into a full blown scandal. As he "traveled around town in a black Cadillac Escalade...surrounded with as many as 21 bodyguards," (56) Kilpatrick was not exactly helping matters by maintaining a low profile. By the time the dust had settled in 2009, with Kilpatrick heading off to prison, Detroit had become the punch-line of a nationwide joke. Text messages obtained by the *Detroit Free Press* had shown "that Mr. Kilpatrick had lied under oath when he denied having an extramarital affair with his chief of staff, Christine Beatty, and that he conspired with Ms. Beatty to fire police officers who might have revealed their indiscretions. The city settled a lawsuit with those officers for \$8.4 million." (57) Michigan State Attorney General Mike Cox complained that, "We have a lot of unemployment. We're trying to build a new convention center. We're trying to

build a new bridge to Canada, and the mayor is stopping the discussion of all of that...He is grinding the city to a halt. A public official can't go anywhere in the state of Michigan without having to talk about him." (58) In addition, Kilpatrick was also convicted of assaulting a police officer, (59) as well being accused of giving preferential treatment to his friends in negotiations for city contracts. (60) At Kilpatrick's sentencing hearing, Judge David Groner admonished him, noting that "You were defiant, sometimes arrogant and oftentimes accusatory to people you blamed for your situation...At a time when this city needed transparency, accountability and responsibility, you exhibited hubris and privilege at the expense of the city." (61)

Judge Groner was correct that Detroit was in need of effective leadership; in 2009 the city had reached perhaps at the lowest ebb of its long history. For openers, while Detroit's population had been over 2 million in the 1950s, it had shrunk to around 800,000, "leaving Detroit all but a ghost town." (62) According to the postal service, "20 per cent of the addresses in Detroit were vacant. In total, that's about 78,000 empty homes." (63) The median house price in the county had dropped to \$38,000; in order to get police and fire workers to live in the city, Detroit offered to sell them homes for only \$1000. (64) The city had the worst crime rate in the nation among major cities. (65) Fox News' Glenn Beck "labeled the city another Hiroshima after World War II." (66)

The long term economic outlook for Detroit appeared equally grim. Although the automobile industry had been a tremendous engine of economic growth in the city for decades, according to Lyke Thompson, the director of the Center for Urban Studies at Wayne State University, it had "suffocated all other economic activity, turning Detroit into a one-industry town. But that left the government and economy exposed when

foreign competition and corporate mismanagement brought down GM and Chrysler.”

(67) Sterling Johnson, a professor of political science at Central Michigan University, claimed that “Detroit is unique. It has no economic base...It is the most segregated city in the country by race or by class. I think it should be put into receivership. Detroit should be going into bankruptcy along with the Big Three.” (68)

City services were unlikely to be well provided in such a setting. For example, Detroit’s public schools were a complete disaster. According to Michael Petrilli, the vice president of national programs and policy for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington D.C., “Detroit is possibly the worse school system in the country right now...Unlike other school systems that have some reason for hope, you just don’t see that in Detroit...it’s chaos and a food fight between various political factions.” (69) The Detroit public schools received a “D+” grade from the National Council on Teacher Quality; fifty percent of its students lived in poverty, with many schools requesting that parents personally provide basic classroom supplies. (70)

In the face of these seemingly insurmountable problems, Detroit now had to hold a special election to replace Kilpatrick. During the Archer and Kilpatrick administrations, Bing had continued to build out the Bing Group. Although his laser-like focus had arguably led to the end of his marriage in 1995, his successes in business were undeniable. In 2007 Bing Holdings announced revenues of over \$700 million; Bing had “joined pizza and sports entertainment magnate Mike Ilitch and automobile tycoon Roger Penske as the Holy Trinity of Detroit business leaders.” (71) However, Bing had finally started to tire of the challenges of the steel industry. Now, with his adopted city in arguably its darkest hour, Bing said he “couldn’t sit on the sidelines. A selfish position

would have been, ‘I’ve got mine, to hell with everybody else. Let me enjoy myself.’ But...I can’t accept what’s going on...As I saw different people coming out and saying, ‘I want to run for mayor’ and I’m saying, ‘Hell, this is no improvement,’ I know I’ve got leadership skill and talent. Everywhere I’ve been, I’ve been captain of the team.” (72)

Bing had been helped in making this decision by his longtime friend, former Senator and Presidential candidate Bill Bradley. Bradley had reached out to Bing shortly after the city council had called for Kilpatrick to resign, telling him that leaders rarely get to pick their moment to step forward, the moment is usually chosen for them; the only question is how the potential leader responds. (73) Bradley appealed to Bing’s sense of honor, a trait for which he was well known and which the city seemed very much in need. Longtime Detroit political observer and columnist Tom Walsh described Bing as “a guy with integrity, good values...nobody ever had a bad word to say about Dave Bing as a teammate or basketball player...in his post sports life he had done nothing but distinguish himself as a good person.” (74) Moreover, according to Walsh, Bing was “basically recruited to run and supported by the business community with money to bring a departure from the disgrace of the previous mayor...I think that’s what prompted him to run. I don’t think he actively sought it out. I think that people sought him out.” (75)

From the standpoint of a political analyst, Bing represented “the perfect mayoral candidate for Detroit. He satisfied the three primary political criteria. He was recognizable. He was likable. He got things done.” (76) In the city, Bing “is best known for his years as a basketball player with the Detroit Pistons. People recognize him on the street and stop him for snapshots. Yet his demeanor is not all-star – more mild-mannered, grandfatherly...he seems the antithesis of his predecessor.” (77) However, if



he decided to run for Mayor Bing would face no ordinary election cycle. A nonpartisan primary would be held in February of 2009, with the top two finishers facing off in a runoff election in May. (78) Then, if he wanted to serve more than a few months, Bing would have to run in another non-partisan primary in August, needing to win another runoff election in November for the right to serve a full four year term. (79) Bing would have to contest four elections in 2009 in order to serve a one full mayoral term. Despite that challenge, Bing tipped his hand in June of 2008 during an interview with the Detroit Free Press where he said that if he ran, it would likely be for only one term. After that, although he not officially announced his candidacy and the job was not yet open, in the public's mind Bing was running for Mayor. (80)

He would be stepping into a crowded field of potential candidates, including popular Wayne County Sheriff Warren Evans, the 26 year old son of Coleman Young (who bore the same name and was serving in the Michigan State Legislature), a Yale educated pastor named Nicholas Hood III who had a storied family history in Detroit, and former Deputy Mayor Freman Hendrix. (81) Most significantly, he would be taking on the interim Mayor Ken Cockrel Jr., who had taken over after Kilpatrick's resignation. Cockrel was the son of the firebrand defense attorney who Coleman Young had short-listed as his successor back in 1992. The 42 year old Cockrel had been serving on the city council and was next in the line of succession after Kilpatrick had resigned. (82)

Cockrel was a former journalist before seeking electoral office. Walsh somewhat unflatteringly remembers him from his time at the *Detroit Free Press* as a "nice guy" who would not ever have "anybody thinking he was the brightest bulb in the shed." (83) Cockrel entered government service by serving on the Wayne County Commission,

before becoming the youngest person ever elected to the city council. (84) When he was sworn in to office on September 19<sup>th</sup> 2008, he became the 61<sup>st</sup> person to serve as mayor of Detroit. Addressing an overflow crowd in the city council auditorium, Cockrel “laid out an agenda that included expanding the city’s convention center, cleaning up trash and ‘coming after’ criminals.” He also called for a change in political tone, proclaiming that “It is critical that we find closure, mend our wounds, treat our bumps and bruises and heal as a city...It is also important that after healing, we get back to work...It’s time that we, as well as others, stop making jokes about our city...It is time to be proud of who we are, where we live and proud of the city of Detroit.” (85)

Cockrel immediately announced that he would be competing in the upcoming runoff election. (86) Enjoying strong name recognition because of his father, Cockrel would have a strong advantage against many other candidates. (87) An exception to that advantage would be Dave Bing, whose fame within the city easily exceeded that of Cockrel. However, victory was by no means certain for Bing, who entered the campaign with no political experience of any kind. For openers, he was a notoriously wooden speaker who would be unlikely to inspire voters in the manner of more enigmatic candidates. (88) In addition, his political message was unlikely to resonate with traditional Detroit voters. Bing was a huge advocate of personal responsibility and was suspicious of government assistance as a strategy for development, placing him out of step with the politics of most of black Detroit. (89) He also was criticized for “supporting white philanthropist Robert Thompson...[who] offered \$200 million for the creation of charter schools within the city of Detroit in 2005. Critics didn’t like that Thompson’s proposal circumvented the Detroit public school system as well as the

Detroit Federation of Teachers.” (90) For some in Detroit, it raised the question of whether Bing was “black enough” for Detroit voters, who had not elected a white Mayor in well over thirty years. (91) Further compounding image issues for Bing was the fact that he did not maintain his home in Detroit, residing instead in gated community of Franklin, only moving to a city address when he announced his run for office. (92) The issue would follow Bing throughout the campaign. As the editor of *Inside Michigan Politics*, Bill Ballenger, noted, “He moved out of the city and then moved back to run and that has hounded him and caused him a problem and that may be his undoing.” (93)

Still, the Bing candidacy had plenty of upsides, including an unimpeachable reputation for honor and honesty, no small thing in the aftermath of the Kilpatrick administration. This reputation added gravitas to Bing’s campaign message, which he articulated as follows: “Our city is in a crisis...We lack leadership. We’re fighting against each other. You have the city versus the suburbs. Black against white. We’re a mess right now. I feel that with my people skills, with the contacts that I’ve made over the 42 years both in the city and outside, I think I bring a knowledge base and connectivity to try and right our ship here.” (94) As for issues, “Bing said the three main tenets of his campaign are job creation, public safety, and education.” (95)

Bing was also aided by numerous endorsements from the world of sports. Legendary college basketball coach Jim Boeheim noted of Bing, “Dave was always focused on getting things done the right way...The skills you need to be successful, the competitiveness, intelligence and ability to work with people. Not many people have those. Dave has all those qualities.” (96) Enormously popular Michigan State University basketball coach Tom Izzo also intoned, saying that “I’m not a big political guy, but I’m

a big Dave Bing guy...He handles himself with class and I think you automatically gain respect for the man. Here in Detroit, he could be somebody that people would rally behind.” (97) Others, including NBA player-turned-Detroit entrepreneur Derrick Coleman and NBA deputy commissioner Adam Silver, also enthusiastically endorsed the NBA Hall of Famer. (98) The Ilitch family, owners of the NHL Detroit Red Wings and MLB Detroit Tigers, also weighed in on the election, with Denise Ilitch claiming that “He’s a man of great integrity, and that’s a quality we need very much in our city politics right now.” (99)

Perhaps of greater significance, Bing enjoyed the strong support of the Detroit business community. This was in part because of the lack of confidence on their part in Cockrel, who represented a far left political legacy with which the business community was not likely to be especially comfortable. Cockrel had hoped to win them over during his time as interim mayor by taking “charge of expansion plans for the aging Cobo Center, which need[ed] more space. The venue hosts high-dollar events like the North American Auto Show, which brings in about 700,000 visitors and nearly \$600 million to the flagging local economy.” (100) However, the city council passed a measure blocking Cockrel’s potential plan for development. Although Cockrel attempted to veto their measure, the courts struck down his veto as procedurally improper, essentially killing the Cobo deal. With that, Cockrel had lost a valuable opportunity to earn his spurs with the business community. (101)

Bing, on the other hand, had an impressive business record upon which to run. Bing attempted to parlay that into voter appeal, by noting that, “We’ve never had a person with a business perspective lead the city...It’s always been career politicians and

bureaucrats.” (102) Pledging to “leverage the power of his business connections to mend the city’s tattered finances and spark economic growth,” Bing also claimed to be “organizing a crisis management team that will hit the ground running when he takes office.” (103) While playing up his business experience, Bing refused to get bogged down in policy details, saying that “I’m not going to campaign making a bunch of promises...People know who I am in this city and they know what I’ve done and they know where my heart is.” (104) Such a leap of faith by the voters was possible for Bing given his successes, as well as a strong record of public philanthropy, which included “writing checks to students who need help paying college tuition...rarely seek[ing] credit for his good deeds.” (105).

As the initial primary campaign unfolded, the field of realistic contenders quickly narrowed to three candidates: Bing, Cockrel, and Freman Hendrix, who had lost a close election to Kilpatrick in 2005. As the February election drew closer, Bing made the “stunning vow” that “if elected he would take the \$176,176 mayoral salary and use it for additional police officers,” (106) as well as pledging to serve only one term in office. (107) For a first time campaigner, Bing clearly had found the right tone with the voters with his outsider campaign, earning his way into the May runoff election, winning 29% of the vote against Cockrel’s 27%, with Hendrix finishing a distant third. (108) However, the runoff election would prove a substantially greater challenge for the political novice.

For openers, Cockrel enjoyed the bully pulpit of occupying the mayor’s office. Although he failed in his attempt to create a flagship accomplishment by getting the Cobo deal done, he was still in front of the press on a daily basis by dint of serving as mayor.

His efforts were also aided by the fact that he was serving after Kilpatrick, so any scandal free leadership would be considered an improvement by the media and public. (109) Cockrel also enjoyed strong union support, earning the endorsement of the AFL-CIO. (110) The interim mayor also aggressively tagged Bing as a wealthy carpetbagger, claiming that “There are no iron gates dividing me from the people I live with and the community I live in,” adding that “Money can’t buy you a record of public service...Money can’t buy you the knowledge to turn this city around.” (111)

Further compounding matters for Bing was the first whiff of a scandal in his public life. Bing had long claimed to have completed his bachelor’s degree in economics at Syracuse University in 1966, as well as having subsequently earned a master’s degree in business administration. However, the *Detroit Free Press* discovered that he did not actually complete his undergraduate degree until 1995. More damaging, they discovered that Bing had not earned a master’s degree of any kind. A spokesman for Bing, Clifford Russell, offered up the following ham-handed explanation: “It was an unfortunate statement...He knew he didn’t have an M.B.A., but given all the hard knocks he had gone through and the rigors of being an auto supplier, he felt he had an M.B.A. in terms of the amount of knowledge he had acquired. He was almost speaking metaphorically. He certainly was not attempting to misrepresent his degree. He wishes he hadn’t said it.” (112) Bing later further clarified that he “was only trying to motivate young players to stay in school.” (113)

Whether it was the scandal taking its toll or not, Bing was not able to hold onto his lead in the polls as the race entered April. Cockrel pressed his advantage, claiming to have “begun to put Detroit back on the right track...reopen[ing] neighborhood police

stations and develop[ing] a plan to eliminate a \$300 million budget gap.” (114) Cockrel and Bing had three candidate debates heading into the runoff election, but despite the heated nature of the encounters, neither could land a decisive blow against the other. In the third debate in late April, the closest thing to a pivotal moment likely occurred when Cockrel criticized Bing’s plans to bring in a team of experts as “an elite takeover team for the city” and challenged Bing to name the members. Bing said he would only do once elected. (115) Despite the endorsements of both the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press*, (116) Bing still trailed Cockrel in the polls as the campaign headed down the home stretch. (117)

A week before the runoff election, an EPIC/MRA poll of likely voters taken on behalf of the *Detroit News* and WXYZ-TV showed that Cockrel was leading Bing by 6%. (118) However, after being joined on the campaign trail by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Bing pulled out a surprising victory over Cockrel. The final tally showed Bing with 52.3% of the vote compared to 47.7% for Cockrel in a race where less than 100,000 of Detroit’s 626,000 registered voters turned out to cast ballots. (119) As Bing addressed his enthusiastic supporters, he sought to manage expectations, stating that “I want to ask you for is just a little bit of patience. As I bring my team into city government, we are going to make the changes you voted for us to make,” so that he could bring “efficiency, transparency, honesty and integrity back to the mayor’s office.” (120) Bing addressed the nature of the challenge, in noting that “As an athlete, for a given night, you can have 10,000, 15,000, 20,000 people rooting for you...But that doesn’t have a real impact on their lives...Now, as mayor, there are like 900,000 people that I’m responsible for that

are looking for a way out, for some hope, for some support, for some help. They're looking to me to do that." (121)

As he transitioned into the mayor's office, Bing would have no time to collect himself and get his feet underneath him; he had to remain in campaign mode, as he would be facing another primary election in only three months. (122) Bing caught a significant break when Cockrel announced that he would not be running in the August primary, preferring instead to return to his seat on the city council. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly, no significant challenger materialized to take on Bing in the late summer primary election. Bing cruised to victory with over 70% of the vote, with accountant Tom Barrow finishing in second place with just over 11% of the vote. (123) The combination of his decisive primary victory, coupled with the daunting task of governance, likely caused Bing to deny the upcoming November campaign his full focus. In fact, he declined to debate Barrow at all during the campaign, claiming that, "Tom Barrow, from my vantage point, was not worthy of a debate...I don't have time for that. I don't want to play politics." (124) Bing's dismissiveness did not deter Barrow from resurrecting the carpetbagger charges against Bing, as well as claiming that voters "want to get behind somebody who wants to grow the town, not shrink it." (125)

Delivering grim sounding news on a daily basis, Bing had proposed a series of dramatic service and personnel cuts, in conjunction with outsourcing to the private sector, as part of a plan to functionally shrink Detroit to a physical size appropriate to its current population levels. These proposals appear to have taken some local unions by surprise, infuriating many soon-to-be-displaced workers. For example, "the local American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the city's largest union,



announced that it was dropping its endorsement of Mr. Bing's candidacy, saying it had been misled by his campaign rhetoric." (126) Bing's proposals, however, were far from universally unpopular. In endorsing Bing's November candidacy, the *Detroit News* claimed that "Bing is the best thing that's happened to Detroit in a long time, and voters should hang onto him." Apparently the voters agreed, as they voted Bing a full four year term, albeit by a closer than expected vote, 58%-42% over Barrow. (127)

Of course, there was scant opportunity for Bing to celebrate the victory, as he had assumed the reins of power several months ago, and the situation in Detroit had shown little improvement. The city's unemployment rate was over twenty percent, the highest in the nation and prospects for the future appeared bleak. As General Motors executive and Michigan Democratic Party leader Deborah Dingell explained, "[Bing's] tax base continues to erode, he's got significant business problems, downtown becomes emptier, there's no retail in the city, the neighborhoods have all been deteriorating, he's got major issues like lighting, safety, police, fire – it's all there." (128) Adding to Bing's concerns, both GM and Chrysler, two of the biggest employers in Michigan, were on the verge of going under, which would only turbocharge the previously mentioned problems. (129)

In confronting these myriad economic problems, Bing adopted a multifaceted approach, involving budget cuts, outsourcing, and a dramatic program of urban consolidation called the Detroit Works Project. Bing argued that the city could no longer "afford to go on providing services such as schools, firefighters, buses and rubbish collection to large area of the city where the population [had] dropped sharply and fewer people [were] paying property taxes." (130) His solution was to consolidate neighborhoods and shrink the footprint of the city. Bing hoped to "redirect residents into

seven to nine economically stable neighborhoods that have not yet lapsed into full blight.” (131) Residents would not be forced to move from neighborhoods which were being deprioritized, Bing noted that they would “need to understand they are not going to get the kind of services they require...they would be better off moving into a more dense area so that we can provide them with the services they need.” (132) While core services, such as water and sewer, would likely remain, other services, such as streetscaping and garbage pickup, might be sharply reduced, or even eliminated, in non-prioritized neighborhoods. (133)

Bing’s program expected to demolish “more than 10,000 blighted homes through 2013.” (134) According to Margaret Dewar, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Michigan, such a consolidation project in a major city would be “unprecedented” in American history. (135) Ultimately, Bing hoped to take advantage of the vacated land to diversify Detroit’s economy by using cheap access to property to attract employers in the technological and engineering sectors. (136) The Detroit Works Project would separate neighborhoods into three categories: Steady, Transitional, and Distressed, with determination about neighborhood categorization made by an independent commission. The program would be deployed slowly, experimenting in a few neighborhoods, before potentially being expanded citywide. (137)

In addition, Bing hoped to leverage his contacts in the business community to subsidize financial incentives to induce “200 Detroit police officers who now live in the suburbs” to move into central Detroit. (138) Furthermore, Bing, a long-time advocate of outsourcing, ultimately hoped to farm out management of city bus and lighting operations. (139) Bing also called for significant cuts in pension benefits, which the city

was paying \$200 million toward annually as he came into office: “The old days, when getting a good city job meant you put in your 20 years with the expectation that city government would take care of you for the next 40, is no longer a realistic or viable option.” (140)

In his first two years in office, Bing was able to cut the city’s workforce by 1,800 employees, purportedly resulting in increased efficiencies and modest reductions in the Metro area homicide and unemployment rates. (141) However, much stronger measures would be necessary. Bing warned public-sector unions that unless they compromised on benefits, a new state law would allow a “fiscal manager to void their collective bargaining agreement.” (142) “Simply put, our city is in a financial crisis and city government is broken,” Bing claimed, “The reality we are facing is simple. If we continue down the same path, we will lose our ability to control our own destiny.” (143) Unfortunately, Bing and the city council continued the pattern of being unable or unwilling to compromise. In December of 2011, the state ordered a formal review of Detroit’s finances, which could serve as a prelude to the appointment of an emergency manager. (144) As far as Bing was concerned, the timing of Governor Rick Snyder could not have been worse: “This state is starting to come back, and as long as you are out there promoting all this negativity, it’s no good for any of us... You don’t need Detroit against the state.” (145) Snyder claimed to have no interest in a state takeover of the city, but was committed to awaiting the findings of the review before determining a course of action. (146)

Bing attempted to seize the initiative by proposing a series of cuts in early 2012, including laying off over 1000 additional employees, reducing vendor payments,

outsourcing some city utility functions, and fast-tracking pension benefit reduction negotiations with public unions. (147) Bing claimed his plan could save the city over \$100 million by mid-year. Council President Charles Pugh sounded a skeptical tone, noting that, “I was looking for more things that were tangible that have happened since you first presented the plan... There isn’t a lot of change. A large portion of your plan is contingent upon what the unions can negotiate.” (148) Bing’s apparent vagueness fed into the belief of many on the council that the mayor’s plan was not really to solve the crisis through negotiation; instead, they believed that Bing actually “wants an emergency manager but only if the governor appointed Bing as the emergency manager. If that occurred, Snyder would give Bing the necessary political cover” to bypass the council and implement truly meaningful cuts. (149)

Publically, all parties involved seemed to agree that they did not want an emergency manager in Detroit. The city council obviously opposed the stripping of their power. Bing vigorously denounced the possibility during his State of the City address in March, State Treasurer Andy Dillon – who was running the review of Detroit’s finances – signaled his reluctance to impose such a measure, (150) and Governor Snyder said he would strongly prefer a so-called consent agreement to an emergency manager, although he pledged to await Dillon’s report before acting. (151) In mid-March, a 21-page report was released by Dillon, finding that Detroit’s finances continued to be on an unacceptable trajectory, calling for the adoption of a consent agreement, with the hope of avoiding the need to impose an emergency manager on Detroit. (152) The proposed consent decree called for the creation of a jointly appointed nine-member financial advisory board,

which would have the power to impose reform measures if it determined that the mayor or city council policies were inadequate to address the crisis. (153)

At the outset, both Bing and the city council denounced the idea. At a forum, Bing said the agreement would functionally implement an emergency manager, but “instead of one, it’s nine.” The Mayor went on to say that, “I’m receptive to help...But you’re not going to just jam something down my throat and expect me – if I don’t like it – that it’s going (to) be okay.” When asked if he trusted the Governor to implement the agreement in a reasonable manner, Bing replied, “When somebody lies to you, you can’t trust them.” (154) The *Detroit News* suggested the possibility of sour grapes on the part of the mayor: “Bing is still clinging to the hope that he will serve as almost a de facto emergency manager, with near total authority to implement a restructuring plan.” (155) Snyder turned up the pressure on the city, setting an early April deadline for approval of the consent agreement; otherwise he pledged to impose an emergency manager. (156) Eventually, Bing came around to supporting a modified consent agreement, which involved sweeteners including an immediate infusion of almost \$40 million in cash and an additional \$100 million in borrowing capacity for the beleaguered city. (157) In terms of appointment to the financial advisory board, the agreement called for the “governor to appoint three members, the state treasurer would appoint one, the mayor would appoint two and the City Council would appoint two.” (158)

Only 24 hours before Snyder’s deadline to impose the emergency manager, both the state-appointed financial review team, headed by Dillon, and the City Council, voted to accept the consent agreement. Agreement by the city council had been hard won, occurring in the face of weeks of meetings and rallies, and passing by a narrow 5-4

margin. (159) However, Bing had not been an active part of those negotiations. The mayor had been hospitalized and undergone surgery for a perforated colon on March 24<sup>th</sup> and he had been recovering at the mayoral residence, the Manoogian Mansion. (160) While recovering, Bing had to be readmitted to the hospital to treat an “acute pulmonary embolism in each lung,” (161) a serious ailment which would keep him from returning to the office until the end of April, forcing Deputy Mayor Kirk Lewis into an expanded role during negotiations on the consent agreement. (162) Unfortunately, Bing would not be able to enjoy a recovery period upon returning to the office, as several controversies erupted in May surrounding implementation of the consent agreement. The first of those issues were sparked by Bing, who refused to agree on the choice of Project Manager for the agreement suggested by the governor. (163) However, a much more serious issue also arose in May, involving a lawsuit filed by Corporation Council for the city which threatened to scuttle the entire consent agreement.

In the aftermath of the ethical debacle of the Kilpatrick administration, the City Council made changes to the Detroit City Charter to give the Corporation Council much greater autonomy in deciding when to file lawsuits. (164) This poorly written and quickly dismissed provision appeared to give tremendous latitude to Krystal Crittendon, the Corporation Council at the time, who had identified what she believed to be a violation of City Charter in the passage of the consent agreement. The charter indicates that “the city cannot enter into agreements with parties that owe it money” and Crittendon argued that the state of Michigan owed Detroit about \$220 million, (165) much of it in long overdue “revenue sharing, unpaid water bills, and unpaid parking tickets.” (166) Crittendon indicated that she was likely to file a lawsuit if the consent agreement were implemented,

which caused the City Council to refuse to name its two members to the financial advisory board until the issue had been adjudicated. (167) As a result, the state indicated that, unless the consent agreement was complied with, the “sweetener” funds which had been offered as part of the agreement would not be forthcoming. (168) Suspension of those funds imperiled the ability of the city to make a \$34.2 million bond payment, as well as jeopardizing broader financing by the Michigan Finance Authority. (169)

Crittendon officially filed her lawsuit on June 4<sup>th</sup>. Although Bing claimed to have urged her to withdraw the lawsuit, he claimed his hands were tied, noting that “The 2012 Detroit City Charter...gives the Corporation Council the independent right to take whatever action she deems responsible in her sole discretion, including judicial action, if she believes the charter has been breached.” (170) The Michigan Treasury office vigorously disagreed, pointing out that “the charter specifically gives the corporation council the power to sue only ‘when directed to do so by the Mayor.’” (171) The *Detroit News*, in a scathing editorial, called on Bing to “Be a leader” and “act decisively to keep his city from falling into bankruptcy. He must order Crittendon to withdraw the lawsuit, and if she refuses, fire her and kill the suit himself.” (172)

Upon consideration of the financial implications for the city, as well as realizing that his approach had made him “look rudderless” as a leader, (173) Bing changed tactics. After hiring his own outside legal experts to examine the issue, Bing challenged Crittendon’s authority to unilaterally file the lawsuit in a letter, claiming that she could only act “when directed to do so by the mayor” and noting that in “taking this action, you have exceeded your authority under the charter and have put the city’s financial[s] at substantial risk of serious financial consequences.” (174) Crittendon declined to

withdraw the lawsuit and the matter was expedited and brought before “Ingham County Circuit Court Judge William Collette, who ruled that she lacked the authority to bring the lawsuit,” (175) allowing the consent agreement to move forward. Within days, Bing retaliated against Crittendon. After asking her to resign, which she declined to do, (176) Bing had moved to both remove her from office and then had his attempt to slash her budget rebuffed by the City Council. (177) During the Public Comment portion of the special council meeting, protesters heckled Bing, causing him to storm out and refuse to return to the meeting, claiming it was “a sideshow and I will not participate...I don’t have time for that. It’s too much work to be done in the city.” (178) Although the consent agreement had gone through, and the City Council ultimately dismissed Crittendon in early 2013, (179) it was hard to argue that Bing had emerged looking anything like a winner.

With the consent agreement in place and the financial board empowered, Bing discovered he now had a powerful ally in his efforts to cut costs. After the City Council rejected his effort to impose over \$100 million in wage and health care benefit reductions for city employees, Bing took it to the review board, which promptly imposed the cuts. (180) This marked the first time the powerful new powers of the consent agreement had been invoked, which allowed “the mayor and financial review board to impose unilateral changes to existing or new union contracts as authorized under Michigan’s new emergency management law.” (181) Emboldened by the support of the board, Bing pushed the council to support his initiatives privatization and the streamlining of various departments, as well as the outsourcing of city legal matters. (182) Sandra Pierce, the Chairwoman of the financial board, was less than impressed by their response to Bing’s



initiatives, intoning that all “nine of us are frustrated by the lack of progress... We want to get these either moving or across the finish line.” (183) Independent of his work with the council, toward the end of the year Bing announced “a slew of revenue-collecting initiatives, including getting tough on tax cheats and collecting fees more aggressively, with the goal of bringing in more than \$50 million this fiscal year.” (184)

Despite Bing’s efforts, the financial board was not happy with the progress Detroit had made under the consent agreement, indicating that they might be considering recommending the imposition of an emergency manager. (185) Compounding matters, infighting between Bing and the City Council scuttled a deal with the state on the leasing of Belle Isle, weakening the city park system and further alienating the governor. (186) In late December, Snyder appointed a new review team, which included Dillon, to reevaluate Detroit’s finances, reporting back to him in no more than 90 days. (187) Perhaps inevitably, the findings of that review convinced Snyder in March to invoke the emergency manager law, arguing that the crisis was far too severe for the city to address on its own. (188) The formal state takeover stung the pride of Detroit’s black community in an especially visceral manner, festering “within the pockets of where the collective black voice resonates strongest – the churches, the bull sessions at the corner barbershop – as a symbol of black failure. (189) Interestingly, Bing declined to mount a legal challenge to the emergency manager, claiming “it’s time to stop BS-ing ourselves” and move forward in facilitating much needed reforms. (190)

Washington D.C. bankruptcy lawyer Kevyn Orr was named by Governor Snyder as the emergency manager of Detroit, taking control on March 25<sup>th</sup>. By most accounts, Bing had worked hard to make the transition as soon as possible. (191) Orr immediately

extended an olive branch, reinstating the salaries of the Mayor and City Council, which had been eliminated under the state emergency manager law. (192) However, a little over six weeks later, Orr delivered his first report to the state on Detroit's economic prospects and the news was grim: over \$15 billion in long-term debt, the city's credit rating was junk bond quality, and it lacked the ability to borrow more money. (193) The news would not get any better. On July 18<sup>th</sup> Detroit sought protection from its creditors by formally filing for Chapter 9 bankruptcy. (194) The worst case scenario had finally come to pass.

Although Bing had originally run pledging serve only one term, he had hinted early on that he might change his mind on the issue. By the spring of 2013, although he had wavered on his decision for months, (195) an upcoming filing deadline forced him to make a decision; he would not be seeking reelection. Even before the imposition of the emergency manager law, Bing's poll numbers were terrible: the previous fall a *Detroit News* poll indicated that only 13% of Detroit residents thought he deserved to be reelected. (196) Given the serious health crisis he had suffered the year before, the prospect of another grinding four year term might well have been daunting to the 69-year old mayor. Bing was also, in many respects, serving as a mayor-in-name-only, due to the powers granted to Orr under the terms of the state takeover. It was not likely an accident that the day Bing announced his plans to not run again, Orr had announced the hiring of a new police chief without seeking the acquiescence of the mayor. (197) Still, it had taken many community leaders and staffers by surprise when he made the announcement on May 14<sup>th</sup> that he would not run for another term. (198) In making the announcement, Bing said that he had "worked diligently to restore integrity to the mayor's office and

rebuild our citizens trust in city government” and that his “devotion to Detroit and Detroiters is unwavering...I love the compassion, tenacity and commitment of Detroit, and that’s why I stayed here. That’s why I ran for mayor...to right the wrongs, change the conditions and conversation about our city.” (199) Although he still had several months yet to serve as a lame duck mayor, in many respects his term was already coming to an end.

Why had things ended up this way and was there anything Bing could have done differently which might have produced better outcomes? In order to understand the final two years of Bing’s term, it is important to consider the goals, tactics, and expectations surrounding his transition into the office of mayor during his first two years on the job.

One potential explanation is that he faced an impossible task, both in terms of the scale of the economic problems and the level of institutional dysfunction in Detroit. Certainly, there is no shortage of evidence that Bing entered office facing one of the most daunting economic scenarios the mayor of a major American city has ever faced. Although he had campaigned against Cockrel as an optimistic outsider, being elected mayor afforded Bing an unvarnished view of the city’s problems. Looking back, almost two years after taking office, Bing noted, “When I was elected, I thought I knew what was going on, but I got here and found out [that] in the short term, things were way worse than I ever imagined...Financially. Ethically. From a policy standpoint. We were on the brink of a financial calamity.” (200) Bing explained further that “...change doesn’t happen overnight. A lot of the things we inherited were a reflection of 30 to 40 years of not doing what needed to be done. For anyone that had expectations that in a three-year period there was going to be a significant change, the expectations were misguided.”

(201) Longtime *Detroit Free-Press* columnist Tom Walsh claimed, Bing had “the toughest job outside of the President of the United States.” (202)

Undoubtedly compounding the task was the need to work with an especially challenging City Council. As an incoming mayor, the City Council Bing inherited, according to Bill Ballenger, editor of *Inside Michigan Politics*, was “probably the worst council in the history of Detroit and certainly all of the United States right now. They are a disaster.” (203) In the fall election, when Bing won his full term in office, the City Council experienced massive turnover: “Five new members were elected to the council: a more than 50 percent turnover was unthinkable in past election cycles...As a result, this council wasn’t going to be a sleeping dog, but rather a bulldog nipping persistently at the mayor’s heels.” (204) For his part, Bing did not help matters much with a standoffish demeanor toward the council. Charles Pugh, the President of the City Council, explained that “we feel like there’s not much of an effort to work with us...We feel like the mayor’s wasting a lot of time by working around us and not with us...The man needs to do his job and stop blaming us and everyone else.” (205) Walsh offered a potential explanation for their combative relationship, in noting that, “he’d get into it with the council and some people might attribute some of that to the pro athletes mentality of...You are not going to score on me right now. You’re not...come on, bring it on...you are not a Hall of Famer if you don’t have a certain amount of that in your gut.” (206)

Further complicating Bing’s time as mayor were numerous staffing difficulties. Although Bing had trumpeted the All-Star team of staffers and appointees he had waiting in the wings, once he was elected that was exposed as wishful thinking. Bing was helped by his contacts in the business community, who functionally loaned him numerous high-

level staffers to assist Bing during his transition. (207) However, experienced bureaucrats knew they could simply stall and wait out such temporary appointees, cutting against their effectiveness. (208) Apart from those business imports, Bing was generally disappointed with the quality of his staff, feeling that he was unable to attract the quality of talent he needed to succeed. (209) His subordinates were “so busy fighting among themselves that there was little energy and focus remaining for the more important battles with the city council, the city’s public school teachers, the local labor unions, and public safety officials.” (210) Moreover, his staffing situation began to resemble “a revolving door. After just two years, Bing had already gone through three police chiefs, one fire chief, and three communication directors, as well as three press secretaries. Some of those who left would come back, only to soon leave again.” (211)

Of course, some of the staffing difficulties encountered by Bing constituted self-inflicted wounds. Early in his administration, Bing named Charlie Beckham, one of his closest friends, as his Chief Operating Officer. He did so despite the fact that Beckham had served a two year prison in the 1980s for his criminal involvement in the notorious Vista sludge probe during the Coleman Young administration. Unsurprisingly, coming in the aftermath of the Kilpatrick administration, appointing a felon to a position of major responsibility was not well received by the public and Beckham was forced to quickly step aside. (212) As *Detroit Free Press* columnist Drew Sharp observed, “it was Bing’s fault for allowing this to happen in the first place. If you’re promoting a new political attitude, you don’t appoint a reminder of past government corruption as one of your chief lieutenants.” (213) Bing encountered a similar problem when he appointed Karen Duma, a high level staffer under Kwame Kilpatrick, as his Chief of Staff. Bing appeared to feel

that she was the best person for the job and could not be dissuaded from selecting Duma. (214) While this may have demonstrated an admirable commitment to meritocracy, “Bing couldn’t grasp how such idealism often conflicts with political expediency. The better leaders appreciate the difference.” (215)

In considering such mistakes, an alternative narrative to that of a good man attempting an unprecedented task under institutionally impossible circumstances is presented; that Bing’s lack of political experience was every bit as responsible for his lack of success as the admittedly challenging hand which he was dealt. Drew Sharp felt that Bing had fallen into an ego-related trap, not uncommon among political amateurs: “He bought into the hype, thinking of himself as the city’s savior, restoring honor and integrity to the office...But he didn’t realize then, with so many showering him with praise and pushing him to run for the job, that the task required more than a willingness to simply do right by the position. It required the political acumen to do the job right.” (216) Indeed, unlike the world of sports, “where a winning shot at the end of an otherwise poor performance is greeted with great accolades, life in politics does not garner much praise. Even in instances of remarkable achievement, media and opponents will focus on what hasn’t been accomplished.” (217)

As Tom Walsh explained, Bing “had no political experience. He wasn’t a politically active person, so I don’t know if he thought he was elected King of Detroit; you would just say what you wanted to do and just do it. Well, it wasn’t that easy, and...you don’t have as much power as you think you have.” (218) Bing quickly began to realize that sitting, “in the mayor’s chair, [he] didn’t enjoy the same autonomy that he had as the chairman and chief executive officer of Bing Holdings.” (219) Running a

major corporation requires the ability to focus on the bottom-line; to abstract yourself and make the best strategic decisions. However, being a great politician can be as much about empathy as efficiency. As Bing himself noted, “You’re insulated in a boardroom of a privately held company...But you can’t hide here in this office; you can’t get away from the impact of your decision on more people in their everyday lives.” (220)

This lesson was painfully learned by Bing during his first year office, when, in May of 2010, a seven-year old girl was shot and killed during a police raid. The tragedy immediately received national media coverage, bringing neighborhood tensions to a near boiling point. Instead of offering his sympathies and seeking to calm the public, “Bing held back, declining to issue a public statement until three days later...When Bing finally spoke, he was soundly criticized for waiting too long and not trying to diffuse a potentially explosive situation as swiftly as possible. Bing countered that he wanted to get as much information as possible before reacting.” (221) However, such a technocratic response was clearly politically tone deaf; the people expected to hear from their leader at a moment of such importance and he had missed his cue. Similarly, Bing was criticized in local papers for his “absence from places like Big D’s Barber Shop, where his predecessors would often mix it up with the regulars. ‘When we talk about barbershops, that’s old politics,’ Bing said...’I don’t have time for that; we have a city that is in crisis.’” (222) What Bing was often unable to see was that establishing connectivity with the residents of his city was every bit as much a part of his job as contemplating policy options.

The failure to maintain and cultivate such relationships turned out to also be a weakness in a most unexpected area, Bing’s dealings with Detroit’s business community.

Detroit's business community had basically recruited Dave Bing to run for mayor; he was successful, urbane, honorable, and, perhaps most importantly, one of them. By the middle of 2012, the business community was no longer the lead cheerleader for Bing; instead, he was "barely mentioned, except in frustration." (223) The primary problem seemed to be the inability of Bing to keep his major business allies in the loop on major policy issues; to allow them to feel like stakeholders instead of outsiders. A prime example of the problem could be found with his handling of the decision to end the Woodward Avenue light rail line. Business leaders, including the Penske and Ilitch families, signed a harshly worded letter of protest to Bing over the process: "What is wrong is that the leaders of Detroit's business community were not part of the discussion... They should have been at the table. The fact that they were not is unacceptable." (224) As another example, when the Ilitch family professed an interest in helping to underwrite a new downtown arena to bring the NBA Pistons back to downtown Detroit, Bing "was non-committal," leaving City Council President Charles Pugh to bang the drum for the potential move. (225) Certainly, Bing should have felt no obligation to support construction of a new downtown arena if he thought it to be an ill-advised policy move. However, the failure to attend to one's political base, even if just to keep open the lines of communication, points to a serious lack of political, and perhaps business, acumen.

Perhaps most surprising among Bing's apparent problems as mayor was a trait not often associated with great athletes – indecisiveness. Throughout his pre-political career, "indecisiveness was a word never used when describing Bing as a basketball player or a corporate executive... All-star NBA point guards can't be indecisive... And when you



have the final say in an elaborate business arrangement...it's your call. You make it.”

(226) As mayor, Bing flip-flopped on several promises he made to voters: “Bing did say that he wouldn't take a salary as mayor. He changed his mind. He did say that he wouldn't live at the mayor's house, the Manoogian Mansion. He changed his mind.”

(227) In addition, Bing had also campaigned on the promise that he would only serve one term as mayor, “believing that he could govern without prejudice if he wasn't hamstrung by the necessity of cashing in favors and milking significant donors for the purpose of gaining a second term.” (228) However, after considering the downsides of

serving as a lame duck mayor, Bing hinted publically that he might seek a second term.

(229) To his detriment, Bing was unable to understand the effect of such reversals on his public standing in the eyes of a public which had had its trust betrayed by the most previous tenant at the Manoogian Mansion, Kwame Kilpatrick.

Going into his last year in office, somewhat amazingly, Bing had lower approval rates among registered voters than had Kilpatrick. (230) Given that, should his time in office be regarded as a failure, an unfortunate professional overreach by a political amateur? Despite the errors committed by dint of his inexperience, it would be unfair to dismiss the Bing administration as an unmitigated failure. There is a reasonably compelling argument that the economic conditions and institutional gridlock in Detroit would have stymied even the most experienced of politicians. What Bing did accomplish was what he could most reasonably have been expected to do; bring a sense of dignity back to office of mayor in Detroit. As Drew Sharp observed, “Unlike the myriad of scandals that have decimated previous administrations at every level, Bing's embarrassments were the result of sincere miscalculations rather than premeditated

wrongdoing. There was neither cheating nor stealing for personal or political gain.”

(231) Dave Bing will likely be remembered as the mayor who “brought decency, honesty, and integrity to the office, after the sewer that it became under the vulgar and corrupt administration of Kwame Kilpatrick.” (232) Given the baseline from which his administration started, perhaps that should be considered no small accomplishment.

## Notes

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## CHAPTER FOUR – THE CASE OF MAYOR KEVIN JOHNSON OF SACRAMENTO

In 2002, Time Magazine named Sacramento “America’s Most Diverse City.” (Cook 2013) It is odd that, when considering its recent political history, such a statement can deservedly produce both a nod of affirming recognition and excoriating bitter laughter. In many respects, it is difficult to find a parallel among major cities to the success of Sacramento in producing a widely diverse set of mayors. In 1983 Anne Rudin won election as the first female mayor of the city. Rudin, a registered nurse who made her reputation in Sacramento as a liberal political activist, initially won election to public office by earning a seat on the City Council in 1971. She went on to serve two terms as mayor of the city, declining to seek a third term despite her tremendous popularity. After Rudin stepped down, she was replaced by Joe Serna, the city’s first Latino Mayor. Serna was a former United Farm Worker Union activist who worked alongside Cesar Chavez for the cause of worker’s rights before winning a seat on the City Council in 1974. Serna, too, was an enormously popular mayor. After winning a second term, Serna died in office of kidney cancer and complications from diabetes in 1999. Jimmie Yee, who became the city’s first Asian-American mayor, was appointed to serve out the final year of Serna’s term, before giving way to Rudin’s protégé, fellow liberal activist Heather Fargo, who went on to serve two terms as mayor. From such an angle of perspective, Sacramento looked quite worthy of the title which *Time Magazine* had bestowed upon it.

However, when considering the state of race relations regarding African-Americans, the political history of Sacramento did not appear quite so rosy. According to Corey Cook, prior to 2008, “African-Americans had achieved only limited representation on the City Council and no African-American had been elected to the city’s highest office.” (Cook 2013; 14) Even the limited success of African-American’s in winning City Council seats was little cause for optimism: “a handful of developers had exponentially more influence on every significant political question in Sacramento than all the Black elected officials, appointed administrators, political activists, and organizations combined.” (Covin 2009; 199) Indeed, up until 1971, when a new district election system was employed, only one African-American politician had ever been elected to the City Council. (Cook 2013; 15) It was into this politically bipolar environment that Kevin Johnson was born in 1966, growing up in the then predominantly black, Oak Park neighborhood of Sacramento. Johnson’s neighborhood was full of what one might reasonably call “cultural swagger,” with the young boy growing up admiring the active, risk-taking Black Panther presence around him (1).

Johnson’s early childhood was full of challenges in his family life. His mother, Georgia West, gave birth to Kevin when she was only 16 years old. His father, army veteran Lawrence Johnson, reputedly an extremely intelligent man who liked to talk neighborhood politics, died in a boating accident when Kevin was only three years old. (2) Shortly thereafter, Kevin’s mother, a talented singer, went on a year-long tour with her group, Ranee & the Soulette’s, leaving her young son with her parents. Kevin’s grandparents were a biracial couple; his grandmother, also named Georgia, was white and his maternal grandfather, George Peat, was black. By all accounts, his grandfather was

an extremely strong influence in his life; respected in the neighborhood and with a reputation for having “compassion for the underdog.” (3) After his mother returned to Sacramento, Kevin’s maternal grandparents continued to play a strong role in the young man’s life. Kevin’s mother never knew the identity of his paternal grandparents. (4)

From his early years onward, Kevin was a relatively strong student; his teachers marveling at his unusual maturity, allowing him to skip the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. His mother described him as “a teacher-type. He’d take time to show the other kids...he’s always been a caring person and had a sharing personality.” (5) Johnson went on to attend Sacramento High School, the oldest public high school on the west coast, where he starred in two sports, baseball and basketball. In high school, his favorite sport was baseball, where he was a good enough Shortstop to be drafted by the MLB Oakland A’s. (6) In his senior year, Johnson emerged as a transcendent basketball star, leading the state of California in scoring. (7) His overall athletic prowess was such that he was later named to the National High School Hall of Fame. (8)

In 1983 Kevin Johnson enrolled at the University of California-Berkeley, the recipient of a full ride basketball scholarship. At Berkeley, Johnson led the Bears to qualify for their first post-season basketball tournament in 24 years. Kevin’s teammates marveled at his maturity and positive attitude, even in the face of defeats; one of them noting that he “stayed upbeat, positive, and confident. He could have easily gone negative.” (9) Johnson took his leadership duties seriously, well beyond motivating his teammates, serving as a role model for his young fans. Johnson explained that “I think naturally I’ll touch kids lives just by being a basketball player...I think that’s why I am so sensitive to kids. I remember when I was a kid and how much people I looked up to

meant to me in my life. A wave, I could live off that. If I would go to a game and who was playing? Maybe Billy North or Bobby Bonds would look over and wave. Whoa, it meant so much.” (10) Berkeley is also where Johnson, a political science major (11), first became politically active, joining in the protest for Divestment in South Africa, over the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela by the apartheid regime. It is also where he developed a passion for educational policy; confiding in friends that he didn’t feel that he was academically ready for Berkeley and wanting others from his Oak Park neighborhood to be able to avoid those difficulties (12).

Once he finished his playing career at UC-Berkeley, Johnson was drafted with in the First Round of the 1987 NBA Draft, with the Seventh overall pick, by the Cleveland Cavaliers, who soon afterwards traded him to the Phoenix Suns. Two years later the “Suns finished 55-27, a 27-win improvement over the previous season, one of the biggest turnarounds in NBA history,” with the lion’s share of the credit going to their young point guard, Kevin Johnson. (13) During the 1992-93 season, he and his teammate Charles Barkley led the Suns to the NBA finals, where they lost to the Michael Jordan led Chicago Bulls. (14) During that series he led the Suns to a triple-overtime road victory over the Bulls, scoring 25 points while guarding Jordan and playing an NBA finals record 62 minutes. (15) Johnson ultimately retired after 13 seasons as a 3-time NBA All-Star and member of the Gold Medal winning USA World Championship team in 1994. (16)

While playing in Phoenix, Johnson maintained strong ties to his Sacramento/Bay Area roots. His agent (and college roommate), Michael Burstein, noted that “he keeps an eye on Sacramento. He probably does as many public appearances as any athlete during a season.” (17) Early in his career, his generosity was already legendary: “He gave the

Mazda RX-7 out of his driveway to a friend. He sent a check for \$5000 to a hard-luck security guard. He donates with such regularity to an Oakland elementary school that it has an annual KJ day.” (18)

Moreover, in 1989, in only his third NBA season, Johnson “founded St. Hope Academy, a nonprofit community development corporation, in Sacramento. It evolved into a conclave of independent charter schools, with St. Hope High...as its flagship.” (19) Johnson spent the summer of 1990 working intently, reportedly putting in 9-10 hour days, 6-7 days a week, getting the project ready for its official launch. (20) In doing so, he “invested \$40,000 in a plot of turf in the Oak Park neighborhood...that [then] served as a repository for fast food bags and broken bottles, [proclaiming]...‘This is the place!’” (21) Then-Sacramento Mayor Anne Rudin noted that “[i]t’s wonderful to see a hometown kid come back and remember where he came from and what he left behind... This will provide a place for kids to learn, to play, to begin to feel better about themselves and have role models to help them grow into productive adults.” (22) After his retirement, in 2003, he continued his efforts, building out the St. Hope project into a full-fledged “prekindergarten-through-12<sup>th</sup> grade independent charter-school system that provides education to nearly 1000 students in seven small schools.” (23) That year he also “won approval to convert Sacramento High School, his alma mater, into a public charter school.” (24)

Johnson’s post basketball contributions to the Sacramento community transcended the realm of education. Upon retirement, he “returned home and founded the Kevin Johnson Corp., a real estate and business development company.” (25) Johnson’s company “helped pump \$14 million in public and private investment” into “his old,

decaying Oak Park neighborhood.” (26) In doing so, he engineered a turnaround in the neighborhood, “where a bookstore, café and art gallery...replaced a large city block once overrun with prostitution and drug dealers.” (27)

Despite his involvement in such high profile public projects in his hometown, Kevin Johnson appeared on virtually nobody’s political radar screen. In answering a question during an interview about how, in hindsight, political office seemed inevitable for Johnson, *Sacramento Bee* writer Ryan Lillis answered as follows: “It wasn’t a matter of time...because when he came back to Sacramento, for several years he didn’t even grant any interviews; he was very involved in his charter school...he was heavily involved in that, but rarely gave interviews. And really, I think, tried to stay out of the limelight...I think it was a surprise to so many people...because he had stayed out of the limelight for so long.” (28) However, behind the scenes, Kevin Johnson appeared to have been establishing the groundwork for a position of prominence in Sacramento, although not necessarily in the realm of electoral politics. Longtime *Sacramento Bee* columnist Marcos Breton noted that “even before he [Kevin Johnson] ran, he had cultivated relationships with the Dons of Sacramento...He was very astute at cultivating the king-makers in town. Not just the rich guys, but the political elites...I think it’s part of the whole celebrity thing. That he is able to exact valuable services from people for nothing or next to nothing...So he did have those skills and he did have those instincts long before he ever ran.” (29)

As 2008 began, Sacramento began to buzz with rumors that Johnson was considering a run for mayor. (30) Breton pinpointed the moment more precisely as follows: “I first knew he was going to run back in December of 2007. He came to the

editorial board to talk...and Michelle Rhee was with him, and this was before she was Michelle Rhee...And so he was talking about how education reform works best in cities where the mayor is on board. And then he started talking about how he was sort of in a walkaway from his role at St. Hope Academy. And it dawned on me that this guy is thinking about it.” (31) On January 25<sup>th</sup>, Breton brought Johnson’s apparent ambitions fully into the public light, opening his editorial with the sentence, “Kevin Johnson, the former NBA star and arguably the capital city’s most famous native son, is seriously considering a run for mayor.” (32) However, it wasn’t until early March that Johnson tossed his hat into the ring, officially joining the race for mayor of Sacramento. (33)

In running for mayor, Kevin Johnson would face at least three formidable obstacles, any one of which might have reasonably deterred him from seeking the office: incumbency, race, and scandal. In seeking the position, Johnson would be taking on two-term incumbent mayor Heather Fargo, who had already announced she would be seeking an unprecedented third term in office. (34) Fargo was a protégé of popular former Mayor Anne Rudin, who had served two terms in office, before giving way to the popular Mayor Joe Serna, who had died while in office of cancer. (35) In succeeding Serna, Fargo had picked up Rudin’s mantle of community activism and was far from unpopular at the time Johnson contemplated entering the race. (36)

Fargo, a 55 year old Democrat who had served 11 years on the Sacramento City Council, was born in Oakland and raised in Stockton, California, before settling in the South Natomas neighborhood of Sacramento. She had graduated from UC-Davis with a degree in environmental planning, before marrying and becoming a community activist, making her name by suing the city of Sacramento and winning. (37) She enjoyed a

reputation as a dogged policy wonk, (38) who had succeeded as mayor despite being afflicted with multiple sclerosis. (39) Fargo made the focus of her re-election campaign clear in announcing that “I’ve got a record of accomplishment and I welcome people to review that record. I think it will give them a good idea of where the city will be going next.” (40) Johnson, who would be seeking to defeat her as the first person to win the mayorship without first having served on the city council, (41) would have no such record on which to run.

Fargo was running as an incumbent and no incumbent had lost a race for mayor in the history of Sacramento. (42) Sacramento was “the kind of place where incumbents kind of stayed in office until you don’t want to be in office anymore.” (43) There was no reason to believe that she would be the first incumbent to lose. As Ryan Lillis put it, “Heather...was never unpopular as mayor. Never overly popular, I think she was somebody that people were comfortable with as mayor.” (44) Even by the standards of incumbents, Fargo’s list of endorsements would have to be considered impressive: “24 local elected officials, past and present, including Assemblyman Dave Jones, state Sen. Darrell Steinberg and all eight members of the Sacramento City Council.” (45) Fargo moved quickly to capitalize on those endorsements, commenting to the *Bee* that “People are amazed how many 9-0 votes we have...What (he) is doing is running against the entire council, all of our records, and we have to defend what we’ve done together – and I think there is a lot.” (46) She went on elaborate on those accomplishments, pointing to “progress in getting approval for development of the downtown railyard and the waterfront.” (47)



Moreover, Fargo, who, like Johnson, was a Democrat, enjoyed firm and implacable support from the party. Ryan Lillis explained that, “The local Democratic Party and the kind of Democratic clubs, of which there were many in Sacramento...women Democrats, green Democrats, they can’t stand [Johnson]...a couple of them said it is because of the St. Hope charter school. Because when he formed the charter school, he opened it up as a non-union school and the teachers are represented by a union and ever since the Democratic Party interests have never forgiven him for that...and some of them have never forgotten.” (48) Marcos Bretton echoed the sentiment, pointing out that “teachers unions are very strong here in Sacramento, and Kevin, he just, some people haven’t gotten over that he just took the oldest high school on the west coast and turned it into a charter school. And some people haven’t gotten over that.” (49)

Beyond the headwind that Johnson would face in running against Fargo as an incumbent mayor with substantial endorsements and support of the dominant political party in town, Johnson was also attempting to become the first black (50) mayor in the history of Sacramento. (51) Sacramento has a long and somewhat painful history as a western battleground city in the civil rights movement (Covin 2009). While some have argued that race is no longer a serious issue for the Sacramento electorate – for example, in 2002 Time Magazine called Sacramento the most diverse and integrated city in the U.S. (52) – such an “*appearance* is deceiving. It leads us to the mythical propositions about meritocracy and a color-blind society. We can see why it is mythical by examining how much it affected the *exercise* of power.” (Covin 2009; 197)

Professor David Covin offers an exhaustive analysis of race and politics in modern Sacramento in his 2009 book, “Black Politics After the Civil Rights Movement: Activity and Beliefs in Sacramento – 1970-2000.” Covin argues that in “the 1990s there were almost two and a half times more routine political organizations than there had been in either the ‘70s or the ‘80s...They were not only increasing, they were becoming less social and more instrumental, taking on arenas such as health and crime prevention, and professional interests...Race in Sacramento, with respects to people of African descent, was not less significant than it had been in the past. If numbers of African-based organizations mean anything on that score, race was *more* significant with the passage of time.” (Covin 2009; 180-82) While increased black involvement in Sacramento politics can reasonably be seen as a sign of progress, it must also be understood ‘as a riposte to a stab that occurred a decade earlier’ (Covin 2009; 177-78); a mobilization attempting to redress the injustice of earlier racial redistricting which divided the black electoral populations in Sacramento in the 1980s. (Covin 2009; 140-41) While race most certainly did not constitute the same kind of impediment to Johnson as he might have faced in earlier decades, it is an overly optimistic leap of faith to assume that race would not matter at all in a mayoral election. While the degree of a race based impediment is debatable, the existence of an impediment cannot reasonably be contested.

Finally, despite the numerous ways in which Kevin Johnson has made significant contributions to the Sacramento community, he would not be entering the campaign free of scandal based baggage. Low hanging fruit for the Fargo campaign would be Johnson’s work as a developer in Sacramento. Although Johnson had helped to revitalize his rundown childhood Oak Park neighborhood, his practices as a landlord were hardly

beyond reproach. In October of 2007, a *Bee* investigation had disclosed “that half of his organizations’ 37 properties had been cited for code violations in the past decade, vacant lots had been left fallow, and some had become garbage magnets.” (53) However, Johnson had done what he could to control the damage. About a month before announcing his candidacy, at a neighborhood association meeting, “Johnson publically apologized for the first time about past problems with his properties. ‘Anytime I don’t live up to the end of a bargain, I want to be held accountable,’ he said. “We could have done a better job with those properties.’ Johnson outlined his future plans...including building a 15,000-square-foot Fresh & Easy market at 34<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. Development of the former sausage factory site is considered crucial to revitalizing Broadway’s commercial corridor.” (54)

While Johnson appeared to deftly address the potential development scandal, there awaited a nascent scandal which would be far more salacious and difficult to manage. In 1995, while playing for the Phoenix Suns, “a story broke that a 17-year-old girl had claimed that Johnson fondled her when she spent the night at his home and the two showered together. Johnson denied any inappropriate conduct, and police determined there were no grounds for prosecution.” (55) However, the police report described in “wincing detail...how the girl met Johnson, then 29, while shooting a public service TV spot, and their friendship blossomed over the course of a summer. The girl told police that Johnson fondled her several times, though they never had sex. Johnson enjoyed hero status in Arizona’s Maricopa County, and the District Attorney didn’t press charges...Lawyer Fred Hiestand – the father of Johnson’s friend – told the newspaper that KJ had done no wrong and that his accuser was mentally unstable and had been

swayed by a zealous therapist.” (56) At that time, the matter appeared to be behind Johnson. However, politics is often a brass-knuckle sport and Johnson may have been a bit naïve to believe the incident wouldn’t be revisited during the campaign. Fargo brought “veteran tough-guy Richie Ross” as a consultant, who announced that all aspects of Johnson’s record would be fair game. As Ross told the *Bee*, “Kevin is in for the rudest awakening of his life.” (57) As veteran Sacramento political consultant Steve Wiegand noted, “[p]olitical life requires a knack for attracting the spotlight – and skin thick enough to withstand the glare. As Johnson may learn, you can’t have one without the other, even if you are a celebrity.” (58)

Despite such potential obstacles, Johnson enthusiastically entered the campaign for the job of mayor against Fargo. Prior to Johnson’s entry into the race, despite “some rumblings about Fargo’s perceived lack of leadership in recent months, no one seemed to think Fargo could be beaten.” (59) As a result, Fargo had done very little fundraising for the campaign; as of the end of January of 2008, she had set aside just under \$75,000 for the campaign. (60) With Johnson entering the race, Fargo knew she would have to devote greater efforts to raising campaign funds. She had successfully done so in the past, having tapped into an environmental and community group donor base to garner over \$750,000 for her run-off victory over Rob Kerth in 2000. (61) Even if she was outspent, Fargo seemed relatively nonplussed by the possibility, noting that, “I’ve always been outspent in all of my races. That doesn’t scare me away.” (62)

Johnson spent February warming up for his campaign by delivering a series of campaign speeches on behalf of Barack Obama in Sacramento and Arizona, while declining to comment on his potential candidacy. (63) Johnson selected Sacramento

political consultants David Townsend and Kris Deutschman to run his primary campaign.

(64) Townsend claimed to have done private polling which indicated interest was strong in a Johnson candidacy, although he declined to release the poll numbers to the public.

(65) An outside poll, “The 2008 Sacramento State Annual Survey,” overseen by CSU-Sacramento Sociology Professor Amy Liu, included questions about the upcoming mayoral race, including asking respondents about a potential head-to-head matchup between Johnson and Fargo. The poll found that “28 percent said they would vote to re-elect Fargo, while 29 percent said they would choose Johnson – leaving 41 percent undecided. ‘It’s a wide open race,’” pronounced Liu. (66) (67)

The official announcement by Johnson was made on March 5<sup>th</sup>, the day after his 42<sup>nd</sup> birthday, in the old Guild Theater, located in his childhood Oak Park neighborhood. Johnson was greeted with “thunderous applause;” he later described it as an “overwhelming experience,” saying he “didn’t think anything would ever trump playing in the NBA or reaching the NBA finals. This challenged it.” (68) The rally itself “was slickly produced, with signs, T-shirts, a Web site and a Kevin Johnson for mayor baseball card that included biographical information.” (69) In his remarks, Johnson claimed that he “came to the unequivocal conclusion that we need change in this city and we need a change now...Right now people see our city as nonresponsive, tired, uninspired and bureaucratic.” (70)

Fargo struck back immediately, claiming that “I think voters will find more credibility and progress in my record than his...He has a great image and a great star quality as a basketball player, but that’s a far different job than being mayor of a city.” (71) In an interview with the *Bee* published two days after the announcement, Johnson

responded to the charge indirectly in answering a question about whether he was “prepared for the tedium that comes with the job,” including “long City Council meetings,” as follows: “When you take a job, there’s a part of it that’s a bit more fun that you enjoy doing and there’s a part of it that may not be as exciting, but it’s still part of the duty. Whether it is playing professional sports or whatever your job it, there are parts of it you don’t like as much as others.” (72)

Distinguishing between the candidates on the issues would not appear to be easy for the voters, with both candidates having “expressed similar concerns about public safety, the need for better services and education, and smart development to foster a better image and to absorb Sacramento’s exponential growth.” (73) However, as the campaign unfolded, differences did become apparent on the issues of funding levels for public safety, models of economic development, and the structure and style and mayoral leadership. While Fargo argued that while improving public safety was important, she felt it should not come at the be done by reducing other services, such as parks management and after-school youth programs. Johnson argued that the public safety portion of the budget should be gradually increased, by as much as \$38 million, raising the 54 percent of the general fund budget allocated to public safety to over 60 percent, and hiring a third-party auditor to find waste to eliminate as a funding mechanism. Fargo responded by claiming that once non-discretionary budget items, such as life insurance premiums and the mortgage on City Hall, were eliminated, police and fire services were already receiving over 70 percent of the current budget. (74) She argued that Johnson was being overly vague in how he would fund these budget increases and that, ultimately, Sacramento will “need to figure out a way to have more officers...and when we have

more money in the budget, it's going to be a priority, but it's going to be very hard to take money out of other department." (75) Fargo's position was unpersuasive to the Police and Firefighter Unions, who threw their support behind Johnson. (76)

Significant divisions also existed between the two candidates on the nature, if not the need, of future economic development for the city. Johnson pointed to the effect of the slumping economy on major downtown businesses, calling for stronger support for the railyard project and, most significantly, the Cal Expo project, which would likely involve public investment in a new arena for the team's NBA team, the Sacramento Kings. Johnson claimed that such a project "would create an environment complex with hotels and retail; it would not have to be backed by new taxes; and it would refurbish the state fairgrounds." (77) Fargo countered by arguing that substantial progress was already being made on the railyard project and was skeptical of the plausibility of the Cal Expo project, arguing that any funding for an arena project on the site should be provided by taking "1 percent of players' salaries or \$1 from every seat at every game," rather than turning to the public for economic support. (78)

Tim Hodson, the executive director of the Center for California Studies at CSU-Sacramento, distinguished between the positions on economic development as follows: "For many elections, in the past eight to fifteen years or so, the dynamic has been a business community that envisions a new Sacramento, a destination Sacramento, versus a traditional candidate, who argues that Sacramento has to grow, but we don't want to be another L.A., we don't want to be another San Francisco... That's playing out in this election as in the past." (79) Given this difference between the philosophies on growth between Johnson and Fargo, one might have expected city business interests to rush to

embrace Johnson's vision for more expansive growth. Interestingly, however, as Ryan Lillis explained, in looking back on the election, "...this was a thing people overlook, they all say...the developers and the businesses, they all put Kevin Johnson in office, well they didn't. They were afraid of KJ; it was better to stick with one's you know. They didn't know who this guy was, and only two or three of them supported his first campaign." (80)

Perhaps the most significant difference on policy issues between Fargo and Johnson was how they planned to approach them in terms of leadership style and, as events would subsequently demonstrate, institutional structure. Sacramento has what can fairly be described as a "weak mayor" system of government, with the only formal power exercised by the mayor being to cast one of the nine votes on the Sacramento City Council. (81) The day-to-day policy details of city policy are handled by the City Manager, who is hired by the City Council. As a *Sacramento Bee* editorial noted, "This is not Chicago...where the mayor controls civil service through patronage appointments. This isn't even Portland, where a weak mayor gains power by granting city council members management authority over various departments of the city...But the city's history has shown that, even with limited authority, a mayor can accomplish a lot. Former Mayor Joe Serna's work with the city schools is the most recent example. But there are others, stretching back to Anne Rudin and Phil Isenberg." (82) Although Johnson claimed that he could work well with the existing City Manager, Ray Kerridge, within a month of joining the campaign Johnson began to call for enhanced powers for the mayoral position, arguing that a "strong mayor" structure could help transition Sacramento "from a small cow town" into a major metropolitan city. (83) Fargo



disagreed, claiming that “the system works pretty well...If we change, what would that mean? The mayor likely would no longer sit with the City Council and doesn’t interact with them. It would be a very different culture.” (84) She went on to point out that “we have very different styles of leadership...My ability to stay focused and stick with it at the smaller level is significant.” (85) According to the Ryan Lillis, “Heather was like the great collaborator, at least that’s what she wanted to be, she wanted to be the person who...met with everybody and have everybody on the same page.” (86)

These differences in leadership styles would also manifest themselves in their approaches to campaign strategies. Fargo, a self-professed policy wonk, wanted to engage on the policy issues in public forums as quickly as possible, where she enjoyed a huge advantage over Johnson. (87) As *Sacramento Bee* reporter Mary Lynne Vellinga explained, “Fargo employs a campaign style entirely different from Johnson’s. She has appeared at seven candidate forums, and plans to speak at another eight. She has chided Johnson for agreeing to participate in only two.” (88) Johnson’s campaign originally agreed to debate Fargo on KOVR-TV on March 10<sup>th</sup>, according to the station’s general manager, but subsequently pulled out on March 8<sup>th</sup> – the station responded by airing the debate with Kevin Johnson represented by an empty chair. (89) The empty chair approach was taken on numerous occasions during the first few months of the campaign, as he passed on two debates and “pulled out three other debates at the last moment” during the primary campaign season. (90) *Sacramento Bee* political columnist Marcos Breton offered the following explanation: “Now, he was rough initially...And it was clear that he wasn’t up on the issues, but he’s a quick study and he got better as it went along and he did a better job of kind of controlling his temper when people would ask

him questions he didn't want. And he learned that it's best not to run when reporters are chasing after you, which he kind of did a couple of times." (91) In the early stages of the campaign, Johnson tended to find unscripted engagements on the issues in public forums an unnecessary risk, given the fact that he no need of name recognition in the community, an opportunity usually afforded by such forums.

It is incontrovertible that Kevin Johnson ran a campaign for Mayor of Sacramento unlike that of any previous candidate for the position. Indeed, he literally *ran* for public office. Ryan Lillis explained this unique approach as follows: "...there was a lot of buzz early on. He ran door to door to knock on doors. He would have running shoes on [along with a dress shirt and tie] and would run door to door and he was going to neighborhoods in the city where they felt they hadn't been adequately represented in a while in the mayor's office." (92) According to Mary Lynne Vellinga, "Johnson said this daily precinct walk/run is 'the core strategy' of his quest to wrest the Sacramento mayor's job from Heather Fargo...Johnson's physical energy and star power are forceful assets in his quest to unseat Fargo." (93) In order to recruit necessary canvassers, Johnson "used the cachet of his NBA career to get college students to work on his campaign." (94)

Of course, his physical vitality was not the greatest asset Kevin Johnson brought to the mayoral campaign; it was a level of celebrity never before seen in a candidate for public office in Sacramento. Johnson was "the charismatic native son whom President Bill Clinton once urged to get into politics," (95) which set him apart from the field of a half dozen candidates, even the two-term incumbent mayor, Heather Fargo. One huge advantage Johnson would enjoy was immediate name recognition, which Marcos Breton explained prior to Johnson's entry into the campaign: "He [Johnson] has the potential to

generate a level of interest and involvement uncommon in local politics, akin to what Arnold Schwarzenegger did on a statewide level. California's Governor proved that celebrity is a valuable currency in election campaigns. Even on a local level, name recognition is key: Fargo has been running unopposed so far not because she is a strong leader, but because she has stronger name recognition than other local elected officials. This is largely what's kept potential challengers, such as Councilman Rob Fong on the sidelines." (96)

His sports stardom was front-and-center as Johnson announced his candidacy. The local paper, the *Sacramento Bee*, led with the first sentence of "Former NBA star Kevin Johnson announced Wednesday he'll challenge two-term incumbent Heather Fargo, setting up a campaign that political observers said will be tough, dirty and expensive"; (97) not mentioning his work in local schools or on development projects in the lead line. The *San Francisco Chronicle* led similarly, writing that "Kevin Johnson, Cal's all-time assists leader and an NBA finalist with the Phoenix Suns, jumped into the Sacramento mayor's race Wednesday, announcing he will challenge three-term incumbent Heather Fargo in the June election." (98) More than six months later, well after his primary election victory, the *Sacramento Bee* was still referring to Johnson as "the former NBA star" in articles about the campaign. (99)

His stardom offered Johnson free publicity on a level which no other first-time mayoral candidate could reasonably hope. As Mary Lynne Vellinga wrote a month after Johnson entered the campaign, "Johnson's star power is turning the usually sleepy Sacramento mayor's race into national news. On Friday, a crew from HBO's 'Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel' plans to tag along with Johnson for a May feature on his

candidacy. [Fargo Campaign Manager Dale] Howard said the Fargo camp had received no call from HBO to appear as well.” (100) The national limelight brought additional benefits to Johnson, including sudden access to national political operatives; for example, “Press aide Christy Setzer worked on the presidential campaigns of Al Gore, Howard Dean and Sen. Christopher Dodd, John Falcicchio, was a top campaign aide for Washington D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty, and is on leave from Fenty’s office.” (101)

Kevin Johnson’s celebrity also took a toll on Fargo; everywhere she went “people ask what it’s like to run against Johnson.” (102) Fargo pointed out that “I think what’s going on right now is a little bit of people being star-struck,” complaining that the public tends to hold her to a higher standard and that “[p]eople don’t ask him the same questions; they don’t expect him to know as much.” (103) Marcos Breton similarly noted that “I think it was the force of his personality; and him being able to trade on his celebrity...I don’t think people who voted for him by and large were too concerned about the policies he was espousing. I think they like him. I think they liked the fact that this was a successful guy and he was running for mayor and that was it.” (104) Indeed, reporters observed that “most everywhere Johnson goes, people pull over in their cars, honk, or spill out of their houses...Many say they...followed his career as a local star who emerged from Oak Park to play basketball at UC Berkeley and then with the Phoenix Suns. They ask for autographs.” (105) It should go without saying that people did not respond to Mayor Heather Fargo, despite numerous successes in public office, in a similar manner.

Of course, it was not simple fame that drew the public to Kevin Johnson; he had an element of likability which was necessary to activate the impulse. As Marcos Breton

explained, “He won people over immediately... The publically charming, telegenic, charismatic Kevin was on display in those events and he would get people on his side immediately... look, I mean, most folks that run for public office in Sacramento are pretty frumpy, sort of mid-level bureaucratic types that worked at the capital or did consulting. This guy was an NBA athlete; he was still in very good shape. Looks great in a suit; he speaks very well and everybody knows who he is so, right away, he had that huge advantage... Whenever he goes to the schools, the kids go crazy over him.” (106)

Johnson’s likability and public speaking ability might appear to some observers to be simple luck, but that is not the case. His time in the spotlight of spectator sports provided him with the opportunity to discover and cultivate those attributes. As Johnson himself said, “Being in front of the public and playing sports and dealing with the media and all that, you get used to it and you start learning how to be a little bit more outgoing and out front.” (107) Ryan Lillis explained further, noting that “...he’s had a camera or a reporter in front of him for going on 30 years now. He was a big deal when he was a high school basketball player; he was one of the best high school basketball players this city has ever seen. And then he went to a Pac-10 college and was a big deal there. One of the greatest players in the University of California’s history and then to the NBA so he’s used to that spotlight definitely; probably better than anyone else.” (108)

As formidable as the advantages of Johnson’s celebrity discussed in the above paragraphs might be, they are likely eclipsed in importance by an even greater benefit, access to personal funds and fundraising possibilities. Over the course of the campaign, Johnson took advantage of local fundraising laws which allow a candidate to loan their own campaign an unlimited amount of money to underwrite his campaign with a

\$500,000 loan. Johnson acknowledged the advantage, noting that “If I didn’t make money playing sports, I wouldn’t be able to do it.” (109) Johnson’s campaign loan had exceeded the amount of total overall fundraising Fargo had been able to solicit since 2005, \$340,000, (110) with the stroke of a pen. Fargo’s campaign manager Dale Howard complained bitterly that, “[i]t’s frustrating – not only to our campaign, but also to the voters, because they’re faced with a situation where someone is using his celebrity and his personal money to run his campaign.” (111)

Beyond being able to access the direct financial benefits of his sports career, Johnson’s athletic celebrity permitted him to use “former NBA players and executives and other out-of-state donors” to raise \$490,000 in campaign contributions during the primary campaign alone. (112) Ryan Lillis pointed out that Johnson “has a rolodex full of billionaires and he loves being a player on that stage...and his celebrity status helps him.” (113) Lillis offered a specific example, in noting that “I remember the Shaq [Shaquille O’Neal] event...people showed up with their pocketbooks...It was at a champagne bar in midtown...people can pose for a picture with him and write a check for \$1500 and there you go.” (114) Charles Barkley and Magic Johnson also did high profile fundraisers on behalf of the Johnson campaign (115) It wasn’t just famous athletes who helped Kevin Johnson raise campaign funds. For example, “when he [Johnson] traveled to Washington, D.C...Mayor Adrian Fenty held a fundraiser for him that netted about \$35,000.” (116) Possessing such an impressive campaign war chest, the Kevin Johnson campaign machine lacked for little, if anything, during his run for mayor. (117)

Despite the advantages of celebrity, victory was far from certain for Kevin Johnson. He still had to overcome the advantages accrued to a popular incumbent mayor,

unspoken barriers related to race, and the taint of scandal. Indeed, the Johnson campaign was forced to deal with a series of scandals which would dominate headlines all the way up until the primary election in early June. The first of those came within days of his campaign announcement, when a former Sacramento High School instructor hung a large banner outside of his house reading “No Perverts for Mayor,” and spoke to the press about an alleged incident of Johnson “inappropriately touching” a student one year earlier. (118) Subsequent news accounts in the *Sacramento Bee* painted a salacious and disturbing image of what may have happened.

It was alleged that during the Sacramento High School senior class retreat the previous year, a student confided to the teacher, a counselor, and two classmates (all of whom confirmed that the conversation took place) that Johnson had touched her inappropriately on several occasions. The girl described to them in detail how he had reached around her at a computer terminal to grope her breasts and claimed that “[Johnson] has also done this to other girls in the class.” She also claimed, in the subsequent child abuse report to the police, that “with one of the Hood Corps [another arm of the St. Hope non-profit] students he tried to crawl into her bed. And that’s why she quit Hood Corps.” (119)

Perhaps more scandalous than the accusation was how the St. Hope addressed the accusations. State law requires that when an accusation is made, that the authorities be contacted immediately, which did not happen in this case. Instead, after the teacher reported the accusation to school officials, who told the teacher to not file a police report until after they had looked into the case themselves. They conducted an “internal investigation,” which involved being questioned by Johnson’s attorney, Kevin Hiestand.

The school then convened a three person panel, which included Hiestand, who questioned other students, apparently without notifying their parents. After the investigation, the student recanted her accusation. Only then were the police involved, who, although they never questioned Johnson about the incident, declined to pursue the case, in part because the student had recanted. The teacher subsequently resigned in protest, claiming that “St. Hope sought to intimidate a student through an illegal interrogation and even had the audacity to ask me to change my story.” (120)

When the press began to investigate the incident during the campaign, the Sacramento Police Department declined to release the report or reopen the investigation, which sparked a public outcry from several prominent female political figures, including former Mayor Anne Rudin and former State Senator Deborah Ortiz. Ortiz claimed that, at a minimum, it was clear that the school had not complied with the mandatory reporter law. While Fargo did not directly level any accusations, she did say she considered the request to make the report available to be reasonable. (121) Johnson called on Fargo to support not releasing the report, claiming that “If I was mayor of the city and the roles were reversed, I would say, ‘If my police department did a thorough investigation, that should be it.’” (122) However, the issue was soon out of the hands of local authorities. Because St. Hope was the recipient of AmeriCorps funding, the federal government enjoyed jurisdiction in the matter. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, as a result of the scrutiny raised by the *Bee*’s reporting of the affair, the Offices of the Inspector General dispatched agents to Sacramento to investigate, to see whether any violations of the terms of the federal grant had occurred. Meaningfully, the investigation would be wide ranging in scope. As William Hillburge, a spokesman for the federal agency, put it, the investigation “would



look for any violations of their grant, including criminal... You look at how they use their money... We look carefully at how (volunteers) are used.” (123)

Adding fuel to the fire, perennial mayoral candidate, a cowboy hat wearing bounty hunter named Leonard Padilla, released copies of the police report which had been filed in Phoenix over a decade earlier, detailing the accusations of sexual misconduct of which Johnson had been accused. Johnson’s team claimed that Johnson was precluded from discussing the issue due to a legal agreement. (124) Ultimately, it was revealed that Johnson had agreed to pay the girl and her family \$230,000 in an out-of-court settlement, complete with a binding confidentiality agreement. (125) Again, Fargo declined to comment on the matter, but the news received prominent play in the local press. (126) Somewhat lost in the hue and cry of the scandal were the decisions of two City Council members, Steve Cohn and Sandy Sheedy, who, at a highly publicized press conference, “defected from endorsing Mayor Heather Fargo and were now supporting [Johnson].” (127)

Johnson’s campaign team tried to keep the focus off of the scandals and carefully managed their candidate’s appearances. For example, when he eventually agreed to appear on KOVR, there were “some strict parameters: He would not appear with Fargo, would take no live calls, and would not answer questions about ‘teen accusers.’” (128) When he did appear with Fargo at joint event a few days before the first candidate debate, according to the *Bee* coverage of the event, Johnson took the lectern first and said “police protection, education and economic development are his top priorities... He recalled how his NBA teammates considered Sacramento one of their least favorite cities because there was no night life. He promised to turn the capital into a ‘24/7 city.’ He said he was

looking forward to answering questions and to hearing the mayor speak. Then he shook her hand and disappeared out the door for another engagement.” (129) Given Johnson’s general reluctance to appear and/or engage at candidates forums, it became increasingly apparent that the spotlight would shine brightly on the candidate debates in which he had agreed to participate.

In early May, an incendiary mailer began to circulate in Sacramento, sent out by the political action committee of the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union, led by Harry Rotz. The four page pamphlet featured dark and grainy photos of Johnson and headlines referencing the sexual misconduct allegations against Johnson in both Phoenix and Sacramento, as well as a “link to a web site that features Johnson’s picture against a graffiti background, and invites viewers to listen to a ‘re-enactment’ by two actors reading a transcript of a conversation between Johnson and his accuser that was taped by Phoenix police in 1996.” (130) In the coming weeks, the mailers would continue “in waves,” “evok[ing] wedge politics. They reminded one of that darkened and doctored photo of O.J. Simpson at the height of his murder trial.” (131) Ryan Lillis offered insight into Sacramento’s personal politics, in explaining that, “...the head of the plumber’s union has never talked. The legend is that he is angry with KJ because years and years ago when they broke ground on an elementary school that KJ’s charter organizations run, KJ [was] thanking everybody for their contributions to it [and] he forgot to mention the head of the plumber’s union...And the legend is that...ever since, Harry Rotz, as head of the plumber’s union, has cursed the air he [Johnson] breathers.” (132) The mailer incensed many, including the head of the Sacramento branch of the NAACP, Betty Williams, who said, “She [Fargo] needs to apologize for the gross insensitivity of the

mail piece, and to tell her attack dogs to call of the mailings.” (134) Fargo declined to do so, claiming she had no involvement in approving the controversial mailings. (135) Her denial was insufficient for many, including Fargo supporter, City Councilman Robbie Waters, who called on the mayor to intervene to put a halt to the mailers. (135)

It was in this heated environment that the first mayoral debate was held, a forum featuring all seven candidates on the ballot in the primary election, about a month before the election. During the debate, perhaps the moment of greatest tension came when Johnson was asked about the allegations of sexual misconduct. He answered by complaining that this is “why politics is so difficult for people to get involved with” and said he “would stand my character up against anybody.” He claimed that at “the end of the day I will withstand this and be able to represent Sacramento in a way we’ll all be extremely proud of.” (136) The substantive portion of the debate revolved around the state of Sacramento’s economy and what steps might be taken to improve the situation. Johnson claimed that Fargo deserved blame, as he saw “tons of opportunity that’s been missed...There’s a reason why the auto dealers decided to go to Roseville and Folsom. If we had an auto mall in Sacramento, that would be...\$10 million in additional tax revenue...That would allow us to add more police officers.” Fargo countered by claiming to have “made incredible progress, not only in downtown Sacramento, but throughout the entire city. We have reinvested in the city. We have taken care of every neighborhood.” (137) Media accounts of the event did not ascribe a clear victory to either of the major candidates.

About two weeks later, in a 48 hour period, three events transpired that, in hindsight, seem to represent a seminal moment in the campaign; not only for the primary,

but ultimately for the run-off election as well. The day before the second and final debate, a head-to-head match-up between Fargo and Johnson, Fargo called for Sacramento police to reopen investigation of the allegations made against Johnson regarding the Sacramento High School students he was alleged to have inappropriately touched. The *Bee* had recently reported the terms of the financial settlement Johnson had made in the Phoenix affair, which Fargo used to justify further police inquiry: “Given that article, I’ve asked the police chief to look into reopening the Sac High investigation regarding potential witness tampering. I told him you need to look at it again in light of the new information.” (138) One of Johnson’s leading fundraisers, local developer Mark Friedman, called the move “completely outrageous” and said it “reminds me of Vladimir Putin using the police force to look into political opponents.” (139) At virtually the same time, the last major poll conducted prior to the election, commissioned by the *Bee* and KXJZ news, was released. Based on data collected the previous week, it found that “Fargo led challenger Kevin Johnson by seven percentage points among voters surveyed over a five-day period that ended Monday. Thirty-seven percent said they supported Fargo, while 30 percent backed Johnson, a former NBA star turned developer and educator...the other...candidates in the race have attracted less than 5 percent of the vote among them.” (140) (141)

It was into this caldron that Johnson and Fargo stepped for their final debate. Once again, the economy dominated the substantive portion of the debate. Fargo explained the stagnant Sacramento economy and problems with public services by claiming “that because of the mortgage crisis and other issues, we’ve flat-lined in terms of our revenues. We need to get our expenditures down. We saw this coming last fall –

we put our hiring controls in place. We're aiming to reduce the number of city employees by 500 – we have about 100 left to go.” Johnson responded by asking, “Who do we hold accountable for this deficit? The mayor, the city manager, the City Council? There's no accountability. Under the mayor's watch, we could have done a better job of oversight. When times are good, we have to put money aside. Most importantly, you have to be aggressive with economic development.” (142) However, the most pointed exchange occurred over the issue of Fargo calling for the reopening of the investigation against Johnson. Fargo defended her actions, saying “I thought it was necessary for us to understand what happened...I would have done it if I had known the same allegations against any other school administrator in Sacramento.” Johnson irately countered that “It was clearly politics...It was sowing the seeds of discord – and an abuse of power for the mayor...I thought basketball and playing in the paint was a dirty sport, but politics is even dirtier.” (143)

In hindsight, given the criticism which quickly spiraled against Fargo, she had badly miscalculated in directly challenging Johnson as she had. Former City Council candidate Jon Chase comment reflected a commonly felt sentiment: “I'm not sure why we're banging this drum. I'd much rather have people start looking more closely at flood control and police protection and the budget...Heather started out as a community activist and had that passion and drive; it appears to myself and others that the mayor has forgotten why she ran for office.” (144) In the aftermath of the debate, City Councilman Robbie Waters, a longtime Fargo supporter, called a press conference to publically switch his support. In his scathing, two page long press release, he wrote, “I'm extremely upset by the most negative campaign I've seen since I got involved in (politics) in 1981. I went

to see the mayor two weeks ago and asked her to put a stop to it...It didn't stop, so I let her know I'd be doing what I did today." (145) As longtime *Bee* political reporter and columnist Marcos Breton noted, "I think the miscalculation that she and her friends made...is that they still try and make him out to be a Willie Horton type, a predator...And I think that's where they were filled with so much anger at him that they kept trying to create this dangerous aura around him that people weren't going to buy; whereas his vulnerability was in his lack of knowledge of the details." (146)

Despite mounting criticism, most pundits predicted victory for Fargo. On the eve of the election, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that, "The smart money is that Fargo, whose tenure is marked more by nuts and bolts than big vision, could take it all Tuesday, garnering the 50%-plus-one-vote margin need to avoid a November run-off." (147)

Those pundits turned out to be very wrong. When the final votes were tallied, "Johnson had 46.1% of the ballots cast in the mayor's race, followed by Fargo at 39.4 percent."

(148) It was a convincing victory for Johnson, albeit not a strong enough one to avoid a run-off election in the fall. A *Sacramento Bee* editorial explained the outcome as follows: "This should have been a cruise-control bid for Fargo, who is seeking her third term. Although former NBA star and Oak Park entrepreneur Kevin Johnson enjoyed name recognition and backing from the business community, his momentum and popularity dropped amid accusations involving his personal conduct and an investigation of his St. Hope operation. If Fargo had run a clean campaign that connected with voters and laid out her priorities for the next four years, it's possible she could have won outright, or at least have received a plurality of the vote. But she didn't." (149)

Although the run-off election had yet to be held, the writing was already clearly on the wall. Marcos Breton, reflecting on the campaign in an interview, described the telling scene as the returns came in on the night of the primary: "...it was a rough time, luckily it was compressed; it was from March to June and he was able to survive it. To me it was clear once he had won in June...I was at Channel 10, the ABC affiliate in town, and was going to do a live shot, and I was in the newsroom when the first numbers came out and he was ahead. And [longtime Sacramento political consultant] Steve Maviglio was there we were both like, 'Whoa! He's ahead!' And that night I knew that Steve was going to jump onboard and I knew he [Johnson] was going to win in November. That if Heather couldn't beat him in June that there was no way she was going to beat him one-on-one, and he won by 20,000 votes. It wasn't close." (150)

The run-off election campaign, although ultimately won decisively by Johnson, was not without considerable rancor. As Breton, had predicted, Maviglio took the helm of Johnson's runoff election bid, with the goal of "dismantling the defensive posture of Johnson's campaign." (151) As to why a high profile political operative would agree to work on a local election campaign, Maviglio explained that "the job of Mayor of Sacramento is largely a cheerleader for the city. With (Johnson's) star power, he would put Sacramento on the map and bring the kind of investment we need." (152)

Part of Maviglio's influence was to embrace even more strongly Johnson's celebrity appeal, leveraging it to increase the profile of both the candidate and the city of Sacramento. With that came the promise of even more endorsements and fundraisers by national figures, in the realms of both sports and national politics. In scheduling a fundraiser with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Maviglio noted that Johnson

has a “hefty rolodex and he might as well use it,” which would also afford his candidate the opportunity “bring people in and steal ideas” about effective city management. (153) Johnson himself unabashedly embraced the strategy, claiming that if he could “take advantage of my relationships and the celebrity I have and the networking I’ve done to benefit Sacramento, I’m going to do that...Sacramento is no longer a cow town, and I don’t want anyone to imagine us or see us that way.” (154)

Momentum had clearly shifted strongly toward Johnson and he carried himself like a frontrunner. In an unprecedented move, the mayoral candidate requested that City Manager Ray Kerridge begin giving him briefings on the inner workings of the city bureaucracy, which Kerridge and the four city managers supplied in July and August, despite the fact that Johnson hadn’t bothered to attend a single City Council meeting since his campaign had begun almost six months earlier. (155) Local public relations consultant noted that Johnson risked appearing arrogant and creating the impression that he had the election “all wrapped up.” Elmetts asked facetiously, “Did he get the curtains measured in the mayor’s suite as well?” (156) Perhaps not, but in September Johnson compelled a security guard to let him in, after hours, to the City Council chambers, where he sat in the mayor’s chair. Fargo commented at the time that, “I don’t think it was criminal, I just think it was kind of bizarre...Seeing him sit in my chair was kind of unsettling. I guess he was feeling pretty sure of himself and wanted to see where he was going to be.” (157)

Johnson’s confidence in his position could only have been bolstered when Sacramento Police Chief Rick Brazier declined to either release the police report relating to the alleged incident of sexual misconduct or reopen the investigation. (158)



Councilwoman Sandy Sheedy, who had switched her support from Fargo to Johnson, went on the offensive, becoming the “campaign’s critic-in-chief,” (159) now pressed the mayor on how much city money had been spent on the attempt to reopen the investigation. (160) However, such hubristic behavior proved to be premature, as Johnson still had to withstand one more major scandal.

In late September, the Inspector General for the Corporation for National and Community Service, Gerald Walpin, released the findings of the federal government investigation of St. Hope Academy and its volunteer programs, including Hood Corps. The good news for Johnson was that the report did not identify any wrong doing on behalf of Johnson which violated the terms of the federal grants given to St. Hope. The bad news was that Johnson improperly diverted grant money for political purposes and mismanaged the non-profit, including having Hood Corps members “[drive] you to personal appointments, washing your car, and running personal errands.” (161) William Anderson, a federal official charged with overseeing the AmeriCorps volunteer program, wrote that “[t]he evidence is adequate to suspect you have committed irregularities which seriously reflect on the propriety of further federal government dealings with you.” (162) Federal officials then took the strong step of barring Johnson and the St. Hope non-profit from “receiving or spending federal funds for up to a year or until the ongoing investigation is concluded.” (163)

Johnson’s campaign manager, Steve Maviglio, charged that “[t]he timing is politically motivated. The dramatization of what are administrative errors is politically motivated.” (164) He called Walpin a “controversial right-wing Republican,” with an axe to grind, noting that absentee ballot voting began in less than two weeks. (165)

Within days, Johnson returned to Sacramento from a New York City fundraiser, with Shaquille O'Neal in tow, the NBA star in his stretch Hummer limousine, to address the charges. Johnson claimed that he was "very confident the U.S. attorney is not going to find these allegations are egregious...From an administrative standpoint, could we have dotted our 'i's and crossed our 't's better? Certainly. And we should be held accountable for whatever those things are." (166) Johnson insisted, however, that the allegations would have no impact on operations at the St. Hope non-profit. (167)

Initially, Fargo did not involve herself in the dispute, perhaps recalling how previous efforts to call out Johnson for misconduct had blown up in her face. Johnson insisted that his placement on a list of officials ineligible to receive federal funds would not hinder the city's ability to receive federal funds if he was elected mayor, a claim that City Attorney Eileen Teichert appeared to back up. (168) After that, the scandal seemed to lose traction with the voters. Interestingly, as Ryan Lillis looked back on that moment in the campaign, he recalled the following: "So the question came up, a couple of weeks before the election...there were questions of, if KJ is elected mayor, [whether] Sacramento is not going to be able to receive federal aid, federal stimulus [funds]. And the city attorney said, no. It will not affect the cities capabilities...[she] put out a very terse, you know, very quick opinion on that...in a couple of days. Turns out...a couple of months after he is elected, I obtained a confidential memo; the State Attorney had hired an outside attorney, whose expertise is in this field, saying it could actually. It could." (169)

However, Johnson's opponents still seized on this narrow opening to take one last shot at the celebrity candidate as the campaign entered the home stretch. Ads funded in

part by California Teachers Association asserted “that federal funds for reading programs and school lunches [had] been cut off to St. Hope...” and that “investigators shut down all federal funds for Johnson’s schools.” (170) Charges of financial improprieties at St. Hope ultimately spilled over into the three debates between the candidates, all of which occurred late in the campaign. The *Bee* described one such exchange as follows:

“Johnson replied he was confident the authorities would find no criminal actions and said St. Hope had become an economic and educational engine in Oak Park. And when Fargo asked where the \$800,000 [of allegedly misspent funds] in question went, Johnson said it was ‘a weak attempt at playing politics’ and said the mayor has her ‘own set of issues.’ ‘Compared with what you’re up against, what’s going on in the city is pretty mild,’ Fargo fired back.” (171) Ryan Lillis recalled the post-debate press conference where a visibly frustrated Fargo addressed the assembled reporters: “...after the debate...she kind of laid into the media, and she said...”I don’t understand why he doesn’t have to answer those questions. I get asked all the hard questions.’ And a team reporter said, well, what questions are you talking about? And she said, “What about the girls?”...and people quite frankly were a bit shocked, that she brought it up unprovoked, out of nowhere...after a debate trying to deflect pressure off of herself. And I remember that it was one of those moments where the air (makes a noise)...Wow!” (172) Johnson, on the other hand, stayed cool in countering Fargo, claiming that, “When you no vision for the city, you do those other things...People don’t want dirty politics. All of those are desperate measures.” (173)

In the end, once the ballots were counted in the runoff election, Johnson won by an even larger amount than in the primary, beating Fargo by more than 15%. The day

after the election, at the team's opening home game of the season, Sacramento Kings owner Gavin Maloof presented now Mayor-elect Kevin Johnson with a personalized King's jersey. (174) Johnson beamed as the crowd wildly applauded him. It was a fitting surrounding for a man who, in the final debate, had "cited his experience as an NBA point guard as evidence that he would be able to work with other members of the City Council, even those who had supported Fargo." (175) Earlier in the campaign, Johnson has claimed that "a lot of characteristics of sports transfer to politics...A competitive nature is one of my strengths. And basketball is a team sport; you work with a lot of different egos. I will take a team approach." (176) However, local political consultant Doug Elmet wondered if Johnson would actually enjoy the job; noting that "Adulation is an intoxicating elixir and he's expected that his whole life. He likes campaigning and the thought of being mayor, but the reality may not be everything it's cracked up to be." (177) With his victory over Fargo, Johnson was about to find out.

As Johnson began his transition into the mayor's office, one lingering scandal made his opening days more difficult than he might have hoped. Although Johnson had stepped down at St. Hope to focus on his mayoral campaign, the federal investigation continued to haunt both him and the organization. Indeed, "just a few months into his new job at City Hall...Johnson's past leadership...[was] an unexpected distraction. Some fear that problems with the group could cost the city millions of dollars in federal stimulus money...Johnson and his lawyers were trying persuade federal authorities to reverse a sanction against the mayor by the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees nearly \$1 billion in federal grants to service and volunteer groups." (178) One of Johnson's lawyers, Matthew Jacobs, argued that "The idea that

somehow these regulations were supposed to apply to a private individual or bar an entire public entity or the Sacramento region on the basis of the private activities of an individual who just happened to by mayor strains credulity...Kevin has admitted that St. Hope, as far as record-keeping went, could have done a little better...But that's really all we're talking about. It's not unusual for a small nonprofit to not spend all their time working on documenting every single move they make." (179)

In late April, a settlement was reached, where the suspension on funding was officially lifted, in exchange for St. Hope agreeing to repay over \$400,000 in federal funds, with Johnson paying almost \$73,000 out of his own pocket. (180) In a different political environment, that might have ended the manner. However, the election of Barack Obama as President had left many conservatives frustrated with the new administration, and that arguably included Gerald Walpin. Walpin, the 77-year old inspector who was involved in the investigation of the St. Hope non-profit, was deeply dissatisfied with the settlement and pushed for criminal charges against Johnson. Steve Maviglio, in his post-election role as a spokesman for Johnson, called the charged by Bush administration holdover Walpin "politically motivated," and charged that Walpin withheld "potentially significant information at the expense of determining the truth," while inappropriately publicizing a federal investigation which had already been resolved. (181) The conservative leaning *Washington Times* ran with the story, with some Republicans claiming that the White House was engaging in political retribution (182), as well as age discrimination, given their dismissal of him after claiming, at hearings on the investigation, he appeared "confused, disoriented, unable to answer questions and exhibited other behavior," which brought his competence into question.

(183) Although the scandal ultimately blew over, it served as an unwelcome distraction throughout the first year of his administration.

Like any mayor of a city of significance, Johnson was forced to engage on a wide array of issues throughout his first administration. For example, the police officer's union was intransigent on the issue of pension reform, which virtually everyone agreed was necessary to balance the city budget. As Marcos Breton explained, "It is...unfortunate that the mayor hasn't been in the position to where he can trade on his contacts with the police and try to come up with a reasonable solution...And that's not all on him...[and] that's a real shame. Because we've had to do cuts with police jobs that we may not have had to do if those guys had accepted some reasonable tweaks...they weren't going to lose their money; they were just going to have it deferred." (184) Ultimately, Sacramento was able to mitigate the damage in late in Johnson's first term, when the federal government bailed out "cash-strapped law enforcement agencies in the Sacramento region...at levels not seen anywhere else in the nation. In all, 58 officers will be hired by local police agencies over the next three years, thanks to nearly \$22 million in U.S. Justice Department grants." (185) Still, relations between Johnson and an important ally in his election to office were badly damaged.

Any hopes that relations between Johnson and teachers unions would improve were quickly scuttled, with the partnership – marriage, in fact – between Johnson and controversial school reformer Michelle Rhee. The couple, who had been quietly dating for several years, tied the knot in 2011. (186) Rhee recounts her next move as follows: "[She asked Johnson] would his hometown make a good base for StudentsFirst? 'You have to come to the belly of the beast,' he said. California was the most populous state,

and its teacher's union was arguably the strongest in the nation. Its legislature, run by Democrats, was in the union's thrall. It would be the hardest state to reform. A few days later I knew for sure: Sacramento would be our home base." (187) Rhee's organization quickly developed a high profile in the state capital. Indeed, her group "helped kill an evaluation bill it said was too easy on teachers and shopped around a piece of legislation to change teacher layoff rules that was never introduced. StudentsFirst also has begun political efforts to take on one of the most powerful forces in state politics: the California Teachers Association. Her group put \$2 million into a California campaign committee ahead of the 2012 elections, and two of the three legislative candidates it supported were elected over candidates supported by CTA. (188) Although teacher groups were unlikely to ever fully embrace Johnson, he and his wife all but waved a red cape in front of the bullish teacher unions.

Despite the presence of such enemies, Johnson cruised to victory in his reelection bid with almost 60% of the vote. Although he was not overwhelmingly popular, effective opposition failed to materialize against Johnson; his closest opponents were perennial candidate, Leonard Padilla, a gadfly local bounty hunter, and Jonathan Rewers, a municipal finance manager. (189) Perhaps Johnson's impressive fund raising efforts scared off opposition. Among his many celebrity fundraisers was Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, who flew to Sacramento to help Johnson raise \$20,000 in a single evening. (190) However, vote counts fail to adequately convey the story of Johnson's first five years in office. Much can be learned by examining his progress on the two most important issues of his time in office: attempts to pass a strong-mayor initiative while maintaining

productive relations with the city council and his struggle to keep the NBA's Sacramento Kings from leaving the city.

While still embroiled in the St. Hope scandal, Johnson quickly undertook a bold attempt to expand his power as mayor. Ryan Lillis explained as follows: "He was in office less than two weeks when he made his first strong mayor proposal...it basically would have given him the same powers as a Mayor Daly, [that] kind of thing...But he did it without consulting the allies that he'd built on the city council. He did it without including a couple who had...campaigns for him...He expanded a huge amount of political capital that ultimately ended up failing. And that hindered him for quite some time. The council would take him on over what, to an outsider, might seem like a pretty mundane issue. He had a lot harder time because he burned so many bridges so early on with that first strong mayor [initiative]." (191) In particular, he badly burned Councilwoman Sandy Sheedy, who "had endorsed Heather Fargo and then flipped. And they used Sandy every time one of these allegations [of sexual harassment] would pop up. And they'd have press conferences and Sandy would take the lead, so it was very helpful to have a woman pushing back on this stuff. So as soon as he became mayor and began pushing for strong mayor; their relationship severed and then she became the biggest antagonist." (192)

Part of why Johnson miscalculated so badly may have been because of some early management decisions. First of all, Johnson, who had run as a political outsider during the election, brought in a team of advisors unschooled in the internecine politics of Sacramento. Indeed, "[n]o one on his staff had ever held a job in elected politics in...city hall. In fact, I don't think his Chief-of-Staff had ever even been inside city hall until he



got the job. So he brought in people who did not know the intricacies...it has its own unique flavors and he didn't have anyone around him at the beginning who understood those unique flavors; who understood that saying something about someone about something would make that person angry, because that connection goes back about twenty years.” (193)

Beyond his administrative team, Johnson's problems may have flowed from his approach to city management, which was not consistent with the type of mayors who had previously been successful in Sacramento politics. According to Ryan Lillis, “Mayor Johnson sees himself as the CEO...He wants to run things...he does not like to be bothered with details or policy...process...he is more of what you would see from a bigger city mayor...he certainly looks up to people like [Michael] Bloomberg, or Cory Booker...or Antonio Villaraigosa in L.A.; mayors who take on a persona almost as big as their cities. So that's kind of where he likes to see himself.” (194) One example is particularly descriptive of Johnson's sometimes ill-fitting style; even now ““Heather [Fargo] still eats at the farmers market. In fairness, you see Mayor Johnson at the market pretty often also...we have a Sunday farmers market just under the freeway just south of downtown, it's incredibly popular... you see Heather mingling with the crowd, very few people will really kind of bother her. Mayor Johnson comes in, he's got a security guard behind him, big black SUV; it's an interesting contrast.” (195)

Johnson responded to his failure to get mayoral power reform green-lit by creating structures outside of the city council to address his pet initiatives. In addition to a formidable team of private lawyers he employed in the service of his policy projects (196), he solicited more than \$3 million dollars in private donations to fund various non-

profits run by close and compliant allies. (197) Many of these programs, which functioned as workarounds vis-à-vis the city council, were undeniably both important and effective. For example, Johnson's fundraising helped fully fund the Winter Sanctuary program for the homeless for the first time ever "before the start of the winter season...While an estimated 3,000 men, women and children remain homeless in Sacramento, officials said the Winter Sanctuary program acts as a vital transitional element for those seeking housing." (198) Ultimately, lack of transparency and poor record keeping resulted in Johnson having to pay a \$37,500 fine, as a result of an investigation by the California Fair Political Practices Commission. (199)

Furthering Johnson's problems with the city council, who had to approve voter based measures to alter the city charter prior to their appearance on a ballot, was his tendency to miss council meetings far more often than his predecessors. (200) Although he always paid for the extensive travel which often caused his absence with personal funds, his absence clearly rankled many involved in Sacramento politics. Former Mayor Anne Rudin noted that, "People like to know that the mayor is on the job...While they know you're going to have to be away from City Hall for meetings somewhere, City Hall is the mayor's home base." (201) It did not, however, seem to bother the business community. Stephen Hammond, the president of the Sacramento Convention and Visitors Bureau, argued that "there is no better ambassador for the city of Sacramento than Mayor Johnson...In addition to being a mayor, he is a celebrity because of his NBA All-Star status." (202) Some credited his travels and celebrity-driven lobbying with garnering concrete benefits for the city; for example, "City Manager John Shirey credited a \$15 million federal grant to renovate Sacramento's historic train depot to the mayor's

relationship with U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.” (203) Behind his actions, however, some saw a significant lack of respect for the city council. Marcos Breton explained the problem as follows: “So he’s a point guard in basketball, but not a point guard as a politician...And I think its maybe he doesn’t respect these teammates the way he respected the players on the court...He wasn’t the first person to do this, but you run against the incumbents. And once he was in he needed to pivot at that point. But he kept his initial public speeches when he first became mayor – he was still bashing the incumbents...now these are the people who you are going to need their votes...So that’s been a bumpy transition for him.” (204)

To Johnson’s credit, after his third attempt to get the council to approve a strong mayor proposal during his first term, (205) despite strong public support for the measure (206), he has finally appeared willing to sideline the project in favor of building stronger relations with the council. Shortly after his reelection, Johnson noted that “Today, it’s about getting [the] council on the same page and collectively talking about where our priorities are...to do things (such as strong mayor) that...become distractions, that’s not where my head is right now...This has been the only place in my existence I have been called a bad teammate.” (207) Numerous pragmatic reasons likely lay behind Johnson’s change of heart. First, the 2012 election brought about major changes in the composition of the council, with strident opponents Rob Fong and Sandy Sheedy stepping down, and several candidates supported by Johnson winning seats. (208) The new council was unlikely to be anywhere near as hostile to Johnson’s policy proposals as the previous iteration. (209) Second, City Manager John Shirey had adroitly negotiated a very strong contract, with a high salary – over \$300,000 per annum – and a generous buyout clause in

the event of the passage of a strong mayor measure; so robust that the city might not be able to afford it. (210)

Furthermore, Johnson began to recognize that his strength was not in the day-to-day policymaking that a strong mayor measure would require of him. As Marcos Breton explained, “I don’t think running things is really his thing. I think his thing is more of being a facilitator; being a rainmaker, being a money raiser, being a cheerleader, being a front man, that sort of thing. You know, being able to trade on his contacts for the better of Sacramento, I think that tends to be very valuable...unfortunately, it’s taken four years to get to that point to where he has realized that.” (211) Ultimately, it was clear to many observers, and finally Johnson, that the push for a strong mayor initiative was creating an acrimonious environment which made making progress on important issues virtually impossible. (212) Although he chafed at the notion, Johnson realized that his move for enhanced power was standing in the way of the project he considered most important for Sacramento; getting public support to build a new arena in an attempt to keep the Kings from leaving the city, and, as a result, revitalizing downtown Sacramento. (213)

Kevin Johnson had campaigned for mayor, in large measure, on attempting to make Sacramento a world-class entertainment destination; sport was a significant part of that vision, with components beyond retaining the Kings. For example, Sacramento has joined with Lake Tahoe and Reno in lobbying to be the U.S. representative in a bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics. (214) Sacramento is also angling to be a “Plan B” to land the Major League Baseball Oakland A’s, in the event owners would not approve a controversial move of the franchise to San Jose, which would arguably infringe on the territorial rights of the San Francisco Giants. (215) The city recently landed a USL

soccer franchise; which could set the stage for Major League Soccer to locate a team in Sacramento in a future round of expansion. (216) Upgrades to the Sacramento airport in recent years have given it the appearance of a major air travel hub. However, if Sacramento were to fail to retain the Kings, these lesser projects would be unlikely to stimulate the type of downtown growth which Johnson had envisioned.

The Kings have yet to enjoy a glitzy new arena; the kind of which have been opened in virtually every NBA city in recent years. Their home, “first a converted warehouse, then dowdy Arco Arena...which was cheaply constructed in a forlorn corner of town, seemed outdate within months of its 1988 opening.” (217) Indeed, even “the NCAA, which used to hold [March Madness basketball] tournament games at Arco, now regards it as substandard.” (218) As a result, it was hardly surprising when the Kings owners, the Maloof brothers, tried to move the team to Anaheim in 2012. (219) Rumors were rampant that Maloofs were in financial trouble and very much needed the infusion of cash that a move to new city might bring; “[t]he family sold its beer distributorship last year...[and their] Las Vegas casino, the Palms, is said to be in trouble.” (220) Although Anaheim made a strong play for the team, they bowed out when Johnson pulled together a strong coalition of local and state officials (221) and managed to win a one year reprieve from the NBA to put together an arena deal which would be satisfactory to the Maloof brothers, (222) despite strong opposition from Councilwoman Sheedy. (223)

Interestingly, although Johnson had campaigned against his appointment as City Manager, John Shirey emerged as an important ally in the fight to hold off the move to Anaheim. Shirey, who had successfully championed a new stadium for the NFL team in Cincinnati in the 1990s (224), won praise “for his significant behind-scenes” work at the

NBA Orlando meetings to head off an immediate move. (225) However, Johnson clearly deserved the lion's share of the credit for delaying a move by the Kings. Johnson had incomparable access to NBA Commissioner David Stern; Johnson claimed that "I've known him more than half my life. That relationship was something I was able to draw on." (226) Stern didn't disagree, noting that, "The mayor has accurately captured the high regard in which he is held by NBA ownership and the excellence of our relationship." (227)

However, the Maloof brother ultimately walked away from the arena deal that Johnson and his allies had won approval for, which enraged Sacramento's long suffering fan base. (228) The Maloof's decision also deeply concerned Johnson and many Sacramento business leaders, who felt strongly that the arena would bring strong economic growth to Sacramento's dilapidated downtown corridor. Although much has been written about the dubious benefits of public stadium financing, (229) it is difficult to dismiss the benefits to a city on a non-case by case basis, especially if additional downtown investment is hard wired into the deal. (230) However, the Maloofs suddenly had an offer on the table from an investment group in Seattle, who had lost its team to Oklahoma City several years ago over the reluctance of the city to publically finance a new arena. That investment group included "hedge fund manager Chris Hansen and Microsoft executive Steve Ballmer," (231) who had very deep pockets; public financing would not likely be an issue for Seattle this time around. As a result, NBA Commissioner David Stern confronted an "unprecedented" situation, unique "at least in the last 36 years," where two cities were in a public and aggressive bidding war for an NBA franchise. (232)

This was to prove to be Johnson's greatest challenge as mayor. First, he had to sell the City Council on committing to an offer sheet which would be acceptable to the Maloof's and/or a new ownership group. Second, he would have to convince NBA owners to say "No" to the Seattle ownership group. He brought together a strong group of allies, including Police Chief Rick Braziel, who argued that revitalizing the downtown corridor would go a long ways toward addressing public safety issues. (233) Construction unions were brought on board by the prospect of 4000 new jobs. (234) Finally, Johnson helped put together an alternative ownership group headed by Indian entrepreneur Vivek Ranadive; someone who, by virtue of already being a part owner of the Golden State Warriors, would certainly be an appealing partner to NBA owners. (235) (236)

Ultimately, it was Ranadive's ownership group's commitment to underwriting a rebuilding of the downtown corridor, in conjunction with the building of the arena, which persuaded the council, despite the opposition of two members, to formalize the offer sheet. (237) (238) The deal appeared to be a strong one for Sacramento. Ranadive's group was offering "a total investment of close to \$1 billion in the core of downtown...the investor group seeking to buy the Kings and build the arena also plans about \$500 million in development – a 250 room hotel, 600 residential units and 775,000 square feet of office and retail...at the Downtown Plaza site near the arena." (239) The cost to the city would be "an upfront subsidy of \$258 million...The city would come up with most of the money from borrowing against future revenue from the city's downtown garages." (240) City Manager John Shirey claimed that this, "is every city's dream to

have this many investors with that much capital behind them with this much interest in investing in our city and our downtown specifically.” (241)

With the offer sheet approved by the City Council, Johnson had to first convince the NBA subcommittee on relocation, and then a meeting of all NBA owners, to turn their back on Seattle’s bid. This was to be a unique test of Johnson’s political skills. As Marcos Breton put it, “Mayor Kevin Johnson was born for this moment...No one involved...enjoys more respect from...the NBA owners who ultimately decide if the Kings stay or go...in this outsized endeavor to preserve Sacramento’s only major sports franchise, Johnson doesn’t have to curb his strutting...What seemed like a death knell for the Kings is actually a great opportunity for Johnson and Sacramento...The ball is in his hands. The moment is his.” (242) Johnson turned in a spectacular performance in front of the subcommittee, winning a unanimous vote from them. (243) Still, he urged caution, knowing he still needed to win over the final meeting of all the NBA owners: “It is not over yet...I feel like we have won a round in the playoffs. We do not want to dance in the end zone.” (244) Still, the *Sacramento Bee* noted that, “Win or lose, Johnson’s role as catalyst for this regional discussion is his biggest mayoral achievement thus far.” (245)

As they prepared for the final meeting, Johnson recently cultivated political experiences as mayor proved to be of great help. As Ryan Lillis noted, “The effort to keep the Kings also relies upon Johnson’s experience as a politician. His team has identified “swing votes” on the NBA’s board of governors who could be sympathetic to Sacramento’s cause and vote against the King’s relocation attempt.” (246) Brooklyn Nets billionaire owner Mikhail Prokhorov described the scene as Kevin Johnson made his presentation: “He’s a favorite son...There was a banter between the commissioner and



the mayor.” Johnson commented later, “This was what I was meant to do. This is why I ran for mayor, for moments like this.” When the dust settled after the final meeting, Ranadive’s bid won out over that of the Seattle’s ownership groups by a 22-8 vote. (247)

In winning the vote, as long as the city upheld its end of the bargain by completing the new arena by 2017, they were guaranteed to keep the Kings in Sacramento and, by extension, allow the city to enjoy the economic benefits associated with that decision. (248) As Johnson put it, “I didn’t win a championship on court... This is Sacramento winning a championship.” (249) Marcos Breton put the importance of the accomplishment in perspective: “...this could well be his legacy if he can achieve this...it also provides a platform to...build on this...to bring industry to Sacramento by using his contacts at Fortune 500 companies and different people; that he can be a promoter of Sacramento as a place where you can set up businesses and create jobs...So he has an opportunity to be successful in the next four years in a way he wasn’t.” (250) Johnson made a lot of big shots in his basketball career, but to fans of both the Kings and the city more broadly, this was most certainly his finest hour.

## Notes

- 1 Will Haygood, "Kevin Johnson is on a winning streak: The NBA, City Hall, Michelle Rhee's heart," *Washington Post*, 10 March 2010, Section C, Page 1, downloaded at proquest.com on 9/25/12.
- 2 Tom FitzGerald, "Kevin Johnson is running hard to become mayor of Sacramento," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 April 2008, accessed at [www.sfgate.com/chronicle](http://www.sfgate.com/chronicle) on 3/19/12.
- 3 Will Haygood, "Kevin Johnson is on a winning streak: The NBA, City Hall, Michelle Rhee's heart," *Washington Post*, 10 March 2010, Section C, Page 1, downloaded at proquest.com on 9/25/12.
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50 In this chapter, when it not the subject of a quotation, I am using the phrase "black" instead of "African-American" or "person of color." Although referring to race in reference to Johnson's campaign as "black" is not without issues, in my judgment the problems associated with alternative terms are at least as profound. "African-American" obviates the particular

experiences of immigrants from the Caribbean, while “person of color” essentializes oppression in a way which renders the experiences of persons of Asian or Middle Eastern ethnicity functionally invisible. Ultimately, I will defer to Prof. David Covin, a civil rights scholar who has written extensively on race in Sacramento, in how he has chosen to describe race identity in Sacramento politics.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: TAKING SPORTS SERIOUSLY**

In considering the cases of Dave Bing and Kevin Johnson in the context of the theories offered in the first two chapters, I will organize my ideas around three premises which are at the core of my project: 1) Sports is an increasingly important site of political community, 2) Emerging politics can favor athletes-turned-politicians, and 3) Athletes-turned-politicians can function as a positive influence on democratic politics in the United States.

### **Sports is an increasingly important site of political community**

That sports can function as a site of community is a relatively non-controversial claim. However, it is only when we consider why this is the case that the nature and potential of such a community for our politics becomes evident, especially as regards the United States. Over the course of the past century, numerous examples exist regarding how sports has brought often disparate groups of people together; first in a moment of shared anxiety, then in collective celebration or despair, before ultimately cementing this bond through shared memories of the experience. Obviously, such a cycle of community building is not exclusive to sports. It can be seen in myriad moments throughout the past century. The sinking of the *Lusitania* galvanized Americans to enter WWI, just as the attack on Pearl Harbor hastened our entry into WW II; victory in both of those wars sparked joyous celebrations which were emblazoned in the memory of those generations. The drama of the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby captivated Americans and united

them in sadness when the child's body was discovered. For people of their generations, they were forever bonded in the cycle of grief over such events as the death of FDR, the assassination of JFK, the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, and, most recently, the 9/11 terrorist attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

While most instances of such community bonding revolve around shared tragedies, the world of sports provides a more even distribution of wins and losses, triumph and tragedy. For those who were raptly listening to the Giants-Dodgers MLB playoff game in 1951, few would ever forget the shocking moment, whether in triumph or frustration, when Giant Outfielder Bobby Thomson hit his playoff winning home run in a dramatic ninth inning finish, the so-called "shot heard round the world." My generation still vividly recalls the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York, when the U.S. team defeated the heavily favored Soviet team in hockey; announcer Al Michaels' exultant cry of "Do you believe in miracles? Yes!!" More recently, in the aftermath of 9/11, the nation rallied behind New York area sports teams; joining voices as the traditional "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," played during the mid-inning break during the seventh inning of baseball games, was temporarily replaced by "American the Beautiful."

Although sports can offer up numerous events which are ensconced in our collective memories, what may set it apart from simple event-based bonding is the continuity provided by the ongoing seasons of sports. For fans whose team's seasons ends poorly, the cry of "Wait 'til next year" functions as a source of solace, hope, and anticipation of the future. Indeed, fans can even retain devotion to teams of "lovable losers," such as baseball's perennially disappointing Chicago Cubs. Indeed, in many

cities, sports functions as a significant influence on the communal life of the city.

Fomenting such loyalty is an outgrowth of media facilitated storylines, where characters develop over time, followed by countless fans, through increasingly connective media, such as television and the internet. Blogging and fantasy leagues have allowed such a relationship to assume an active, rather than merely passive, role for spectators.

Although such mechanisms could have fastened onto other aspects of celebrity culture, such as music or film, the world of sports has ripened in this area primarily as a result of its unpredictability and authenticity.

The rising role of sports has resulted in the strengthening of so-called “wispy communities” of fans; not just fans of specific teams, but group engagement in the consumption of spectator sports more broadly. Political scientists such as Markovits and Lensmann have argued that such engagement constitutes a meaningful site of both bridging and bonding social capital. European political theorists such as Bourdieu have agreed with such an assessment. While the notion that sports can function as a source of bonding social capital, with sometimes virulently exclusionary results, in the United States it has also served a bridging function. Two factors might explain why sports in America have rarely produced the sort of violence produced by soccer hooliganism in Europe and Latin America. First, the wide variety and seasonal nature of American spectator sports spreads out and dilutes the impact of the performance of any particular sports team. Second, in oppressive societies, sports can operate as a surrogate for political dissent, functioning as a more socially acceptable and less personally dangerous outlet for frustration with government, political parties, and politicians. Consider how the Real Madrid/Barcelona rivalry in soccer has reflected and enacted the split in Spanish

society over Franco and the call for Catalonian independence. Consider further how in Italy, the activities of right-wing fans of soccer teams such as Juventus and Lazio have reflected their sympathy for socially restricted, pro-fascist, anti-immigrant political speech. In the U.S., which enjoys relatively strong protections for political speech, sports rarely takes on such an incendiary and divisive role.

Indeed, in the United States, there is clear evidence that, even outside of the rarity of the open nationalism of the Olympic Games, sports can bring diverse groups together, even as it promotes internal group bonding. Consider the example of Joe Louis and race relations in the United States. When Joe Louis lost to Max Schmeling in their first fight, in 1936, Langston Hughes described the aftermath: “I walked down Seventh Avenue and saw grown men weeping like children, and women sitting on the curbs with their heads in their hands. All across the country that night when the news came that Joe was knocked out, people cried.” (Hughes and McLaren 2002; 307) Before the second fight in 1938, FDR reportedly implored Louis to fight as hard as he could for his country. Americans of all races gathered around the radio to follow the rematch, but the fight was especially poignant for black Americans. Maya Angelou described the reaction in her uncle’s country store when Louis was in trouble early in the fight: “My race groaned. It was our people failing. It was another lynching, yet another black man hanging on a tree...this might be the end of the world. If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes...” When Louis rallied to win the fight, the joy was equally vibrant; he was “Champion of the world. A Black boy. Some Black mother’s son. He was the strongest man in the world. People drank Coca-Cola like ambrosia and ate candy

bars like Christmas.” (Bak 1998; 103-04) As a result of such victories as those over Schmeling, Louis, at least for an important moment, transcended race and arguably became America’s first African-American hero. (Bloom and Willard 2002; 46-47) In subsequent decades, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Bill Russell, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan have all played similarly important roles in nudging the United States toward understanding its common humanity.

During World War II and the Vietnam War, the shared experiences of sacrifice by war veterans functioned as a source of contact theory, making the belief in biologically driven racial inferiority far more difficult for many white Americans to maintain. It seems possible that the experience of watching athletes of different races and genders performing under pressure might produce a similar effect, functioning as a media-produced, less intense form of contact theory. While athletics certainly represents a less compelling venue for heroism than military service during wartime, spectator sports often occur on a much more public stage, being pumped into the homes of many millions of rapt viewers. In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013, the often racially divided city of Boston was galvanized by the words of a Latino ballplayer, David Ortiz, who addressed the crowd before a Red Sox game, stoking them into a frenzy by declaring “The jersey that we wear today, it doesn’t say Red Sox. It says Boston... This is our fucking city! And nobody’s going to dictate our freedom. Stay strong!” (1)

Absent the influence of sports, it is difficult to imagine Bostonians of an earlier generation giving much credence to, much less be so strongly moved by, the words of a dark skinned Latino from a foreign country.

The role sports can play in the construction of ideational communities carries with it implications for politics. Social networks have long been known to function as sites of an implicit politics. In Granges, Masonic Lodges, and churches of all denominations, people formed micro-cultures of affinity where they developed comfort and confidence in relating to each other. They spoke of issues related to their organizations, but, as their relationships began to develop the element of mutual respect based upon such interactions, conversations could spill over into the realm of political topics. With the rise of increasingly interactive media, the presence of a formal organizing institution is becoming of less importance in the construction of such proto-political spaces. Sports bars, talk radios, chat rooms, and message boards all provide a venue for such community building. It is my contention that such an implicit politics can set the stage for a more explicitly political role for sports. While athletes have occasionally weighed in with endorsements on political issues or candidates for office, the enhanced role of sports as an ideational community has ripened the opportunity for athletes to become more successfully involved in politics, as candidates for elective office.

### **Emerging politics can favor athletes-turned-politicians**

For most of the nineteenth century, political campaigns were dominated by party affiliation and, implicitly or explicitly, the spoils of patronage. Voters, especially in local elections, could usually be counted on to vote for their party ticket, rather than focusing their attention on the relative merits of specific candidates. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, however, specific candidates started to become more central to campaigns; personalities began to trump platforms. Politicians such as William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt, both vibrant personalities and strong public speakers,

represented such a trend (Milkis 2009). This trend continued throughout the twentieth century, arguably opening the door for a politics of celebrity to become a significant force in American politics.

The influence of television in American culture contributed to this trend, bringing celebrities into the homes of millions of people on a nightly basis. The popularity of movies allowed actors and actresses to become a source of water cooler conversations at work. Darrell West (2003, 2010) and others have argued persuasively the rise of such media made possible the election of Ronald Reagan as Governor of California. Numerous scholars contend that the telegenic John Kennedy, with his boyish good looks, may have prevailed over Nixon in their campaign debates based primarily on such qualities. People simply liked Kennedy more than Nixon, even if they might have agreed more with Nixon's platform or found his record of experience to be vastly superior to that of his younger opponent. The acceleration of this trend has resulted in an increasingly good fit between celebrity candidates and emerging media approaches.

Of course, the rising influence of television, as well as the increasing role of the internet as a source of information to the public, cannot entirely explain the rise of celebrity politics in the United States. Many analysts, such as T'Hart and Tindall (2009), have noted that if public trust in political systems and parties are low, the chances of celebrities winning elective office increases. Because celebrity politicians can generate their own audiences at political rallies and such, they are not nearly as dependent upon political parties as would be most political amateurs. As Kamons (2007) has noted, the presence of a weak party structure significantly enhances the odds of celebrity victory in elections. Moreover, in the case of political environments where there is dissatisfaction



with the effectiveness of political process, being perceived as an outsider becomes an outright advantage. Being perceived as untainted by a political apparatus about which people are highly skeptical, as Marsh (2010) noted, can further open the door to celebrity victory.

Sports are especially well positioned to take advantage of such situations. Over the last thirty years, the national media exposure of sports has grown dramatically across increasingly diverse sources of mass media. This fragmentation of the media, manifesting itself in the rise of cable television and the internet, as Thrall (2008) noted, has stripped major media outlets of their traditional gatekeeper function and presented opportunities not just to athletes, but to celebrities across the board. However, sports has benefitted in a particularly strong manner due to its unpredictability (and resulting authenticity) and its capacity for community building. Movie and television stars, acting in television programs and movies with engaging and carefully crafted story lines, can connect with voters in a manner which traditional politicians cannot hope to. Athletes, however, perform storylines with truly unpredictable outcomes, with results which are widely believed by audiences to be achievement based. As Markovits and Rensmann (2010) have noted, it is this authenticity which has been at the core of the public's increasing fascination with sports.

This fascination with sports can assert an effect on electoral outcomes. For example, Healy, Malhotra, and Mo (2009) demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between college football victories and incumbent success in elections in cities whose university football teams were successful. Miller's (2013) demonstrated that this link is not limited to college sports, pointing out a robust relationship between

victories by local professional sports teams and success by incumbents in mayoral elections. Indeed, this factor plays a decisive role in 5-10% of all such mayoral elections. When this fascination with sports is tapped into in an explicitly political manner by candidates for office, it can provide those candidates with an impressive campaign toolkit, with the potential to have a significant effect on electoral outcomes.

Foremost among the potential advantages enjoyed by athletes-turned-politicians is one enjoyed by most celebrity politicians: name recognition. (West 2003, Canon 1999) Potential voters are more likely to know the name of a celebrity than most political amateurs; in the case of former athletes seeking office, this association is almost always positive. Such a connection offers numerous advantages throughout the campaign. For example, almost twenty years ago, Tom McMillen, a former NBA player who was elected to Congress from Maryland, noted that, "No question that it opens doors... Your opponent might hold a rally and attract 10 people. You might do the same and 100 people will show up." (2) Sports influence has grown significantly since McMillen served in Congress, with the likely result that the advantages accrued have grown as well.

Of course, it is important to disaggregate the range of advantages enjoyed by athletes-turned-politicians which flow from positive name recognition. In terms of recruiting staff volunteers, Kevin Johnson enjoyed important early success in doing so on college campuses, where his reputation as a former NBA star marked him as someone who students would want to meet irrespective of his position on policy issues. Indeed, frequently people would pull their cars over or come running from their homes for the chance to meet the basketball great. Perhaps of greater importance, his fame, according to *Sacramento Bee* columnist Marcos Breton, allowed Johnson unparalleled access to the

political and business elite of the city. He played upon this fandom, trotting out former NBA stars such as Magic Johnson, Shaquille O’Neal, and Charles Barkley at numerous fundraising events, smiling in pictures as checks were being collected to fund Johnson’s campaign. Indeed, Johnson managed the raise just under a half million dollars for the primary campaign alone, an outlandishly large source of funding in the context of Sacramento politics.

Although Dave Bing tapped into this advantage to a lesser degree than Johnson, as fundraising was a minor concern in the Detroit campaign, he too enjoyed a positive notoriety linked to his days as a star with the local pro basketball team. He was frequently stopped on the streets of Detroit and asked to appear in pictures. This was not happening because he was the owner of Bing Steel; it was because he was in the Basketball Hall of Fame. He was actively endorsed by legendary college basketball coach Jim Boeheim and the popular basketball coach at Michigan State University, Tom Izzo. The locally prominent Ilitch family, owners of the NHL Detroit Red Wings and MLB Detroit Tigers, also threw their support behind Bing.

However, what distinguished Bing’s campaign from that of Johnson embodies the fundamental difference between being a First Wave and Second Wave athlete-turned-politician. While Bing was gracious in meeting fans and receiving endorsement from friends in the world of sports, he did not embrace the mantle of having been a successful professional athlete. Instead, he put his business experience front and center in his campaign. Bing, in a manner akin to Jack Kemp and Bill Bradley, did not want to be typecast as a former athlete, seen by voters and potential future peers as a “dumb jock.”

(3) As a result, while not disavowing as sports based fame, it was not integrated into his

campaign strategy. Johnson, on the other hand, embraced his sports based fame. As a Second Wave athlete-turned-politician, he was unconcerned about being stereotyped as a “dumb jock.” Instead, utilizing that fame was a significant part of his campaign strategy.

Examples of how Johnson brought his fame into play during his campaign against Fargo extend beyond staff recruitment and fundraising. He publically maintained that his time as an NBA point guard had taught him to be a good teammate, a trait that would be useful in working with the Sacramento City Council. He further argued that regularly visiting over twenty different major cities on NBA road trips each season had given him a unique perspective on different options in urban planning. Johnson trumpeted his connections with major NBA officials, speculating that it would be useful in helping keep the city’s NBA franchise from moving elsewhere.

Another trait of Second Wave athletes-turned-politicians became evident during the course of Johnson’s campaign – being relatively comfortable with the media and public scrutiny. Bing had played in the 1970’s, before the NBA’s public profile skyrocketed under the leadership of David Stern; media coverage of the sport was far less than it has become in the post Magic Johnson-Larry Bird led era of the 1980’s. Bing was a relatively wooden public speaker who, after winning election, demonstrated no flair for public relations driven political strategies. Johnson, on the other hand, played during the Michael Jordan era, when the NBA became an immensely popular global brand, where highlights and interviews might appear nightly on ESPN and other networks. When Johnson was presented with the opportunity to have a profile segment broadcast on HBO’s “Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel,” he seized the opportunity to great effect; his opponent, Heather Fargo, wasn’t offered any kind of opportunity to speak on the

program. Fargo complained that everyone seemed star-struck by Johnson, that reporters did not ask him questions as difficult as she faced and that the bar for answers to policy questions was unreasonably low. Fargo also became publically frustrated when Johnson was able to draw upon vast personal funds for his campaign. Second Wave athletes-turned-politicians played during an era where salaries for sports stars were exponentially higher than their predecessors, allowing campaign spending normally associated with incumbents or the occasional gadfly businessman who might jump into the campaign as a political amateur.

Ultimately, it my contention that First Wave athletes-turned-politicians operate under conditions and with tools similar to those of most traditional celebrity politicians. They enjoy an early boost from name recognition and curious media coverage, but it is often not durable. They often have access to personal wealth and a donor base which would not accrue to the typical political amateur. Second Wave athletes-turned-politicians possess these same tools, but are able to grasp them more firmly and use them to greater effect. They do not appear bashful about their fame; instead they embrace it and openly use it as a basis of comparison with their opponents. Perhaps most significantly, Second Wave athletes-turned-politicians may not require the conditions required by most celebrity politicians for success: an unpopular incumbent opponent, weak party structure, and/or widespread discontent with how the relevant political institution is functioning. Bing ran for mayor in the aftermath of the Kilpatrick scandal, against a member of an unpopular and highly dysfunctional city council, barely winning a close election. When Johnson won against Fargo, she was a relatively popular two-term incumbent who enjoyed the unanimous support of the city council. While conventional

wisdom about celebrity politicians might have seen a Bing victory as plausible, Johnson's strong victory against Fargo would be seen as improbable verging on impossible within such a framework. Johnson victory would seem to be an example of the emerging power and potential of Second Wave athletes-turned-politicians.

### **Athletes-turned-politicians can function as a positive influence on democratic politics in the United States**

In reviewing the political science literature, reaction to the notion of an increasing influence for celebrity politics in America tends to vary quite little, maintaining a position somewhere between denial and dread. Those who tend to deny that the trend exists are increasingly in the minority. The reasons why the influence of celebrity has grown have been explained at length throughout my project: the development of campaign strategies focusing on individual candidates rather than emphasizing party affiliation, the diminishing influence of mainstream mass media as gatekeepers for what constitutes political discourse and who should be treated as serious candidates for office, the presence of periods of time where the faith of citizens that traditional candidates for office will function effectively as proxies for voter policy preferences and/or will act in accordance with the broader public interest, collectively constitute the primary line of argument for why celebrity politics is an especially good fit with our present political circumstances. Victories by candidates such as Bing and Johnson, along with the litany of other victories listed in the opening chapter, suggesting that sports have become a particularly ripe source of celebrity politics, seeping into the explicitly political world of electoral politics, as an outgrowth of the longstanding influence in the implicitly political world of socially constructed, imagined communities.

As a result, it is necessary to consider the notion of whether this form of celebrity politics should fill democratic theorists with a sense of dread. At a certain point, however, the question seems rather moot – the importance of the individual qualities in a candidate, as opposed to the primacy of party affiliation and ideological commitment to party platforms, is a trend which has been unfolding in American politics for over a century. Thimsen (2010) argued compellingly that the traditional methods of “star building” now dominate American political campaigns. Photo spreads, lifestyle based interviews, and image consultants are now regular features of on the American political landscape, even among traditional party produced candidates. Even if one wanted to, a person couldn’t wish them away any more than a person might reasonably wish away death and taxes. The strong influence of celebrity-style politics is here to stay; the real question being whether we need to be fearful of an actual celebrity appearing in the starring role of candidate. Can the election of such candidates represent anything more than a rejectionist denouement of our democratic political process; the functional equivalent of voting the school mascot in as student body president of the high school? If such candidates are elected to office, will such inexperienced, amateur politics turn in such poor job performances that, irrespective of the implications of their election to office, the policy outcomes will be so poor as to profoundly undermine the performance of our democratic machinery.

As to the former question, West and others maintain the position that the rising influence of celebrity politics represents the collapse of the responsible political discourse required by a healthy democracy, foreclosing the potential for strong and effective candidates to assume leadership. However, for writers such as Thall (2008), such a

development does not necessarily represent a decline in American politics, instead it presents a necessary opportunity to understand how cultural change is altering how American electoral politics operates. Moreover, I would maintain that the rise of celebrity politics need not evoke such a sense of dread, that victories by celebrity politicians may be an outcome reflecting a sense of agency by a restive public reflective, perhaps constituting a coherent and defensible form of democratic deliberation. Street (2012) argues that for an emerging generation, one which consumes politics and expresses political perspectives through a more varied and unfiltered method than previous generations, voting for celebrities is a function of voting behavior based on who will speak on behalf of the public, rather than for or against various packages of policies. For such voters, authenticity and culturally driven affinity produce candidates who function as proxy for the public; candidates who are not beholden to party interests and possess a level of independence not often found in a political environment where donor money can seemingly constitute trumping political speech.

Such symbolic politics, especially as regards voting for political amateurs, has, with some reasonable justification, been a source of concern for democratic theorists. Often it has assumed a form of *rejective* politics, an attempt to send a signal of disapproval regarding the quality of traditional candidates and/or how the political process is (not) functioning. In that sense, *rejective* symbolic politics represent a surrender of meaningful agency, a tipping over of the political chessboard as a form of protest. Another variant of symbolic politics can be found with *descriptive* politics, the decision to vote for candidates who share certain traits in common with the voter, irrespective of their policy positions. When these commonalities revolve around



immutable traits, such as race or gender, they constitute a significant problem for a healthy democracy, one seeking to protect the minority as well as the majority in a society.

I would suggest that celebrity politics, and athletes-turned-politicians in particular, might constitute a third variation of symbolic politics; an *aspirational* politics. Such a politics, as I argued earlier, involves voting for individuals who embody the personality traits we would like to see among our leaders. Street (2012) and others have argued that those traits involve authenticity and effort-based achievement, two characteristics which can enjoy strong connectivity with athletes and the world of sports. By widening the frame of what we consider rational political behavior to accommodate candidate-centered, rather than policy or experience-centered choices, we can understand that the world of the political engagement becomes attractive to a group of people who might otherwise not be engaged in politics or voting at all. Moreover, the values associated with sports might raise the bar on what constitutes good leadership in terms of honor and fairness, at least relative to what constitutes responsive leadership in the sausage-making environment of contemporary American politics. At a minimum, such a potential might at least partially assuage the concerns of democratic theorists who have looked upon celebrity politics with only dread in their hearts and minds.

Of course, election to office only addresses one aspect of the previously articulated concerns about the effect of athletes-turned-politicians on American democracy – job performance has yet to be considered in this chapter. It is my hope that the cases of Dave Bing and Kevin Johnson can be of use in considering this issue. Both Canon and West believe that political amateurs, celebrity politicians in particular, are

overwhelmingly likely to be disappointments as elected officials. Did the administrations of Bing and Johnson confirm or deny such an expectation?

At first blush, Dave Bing's tenure as Mayor of Detroit would seem to be consistent with the expectation of failed leadership. Certainly, Bing made many missteps during his time in office: he displayed a tin ear in dealing with crises, failed to maintain a common touch in his dealing with his core constituents, and was frequently the victim of his own indecisiveness and flip-flopping on important policy and public relations decisions. However, it is important to remember how bad the situation was for Detroit when Bing took office. There is a reasonable argument to be made that no mortal mayor could have kept Detroit from falling into bankruptcy; that in the aftermath of the disastrous Kilpatrick administration, Detroit city politics had become so dysfunctional and the economic outlook was so bleak that the ship could not have realistically have been righted by any leader. Bing focused his campaign on restoring honor to the mayor's office and, in maintaining an administration free of scandals and financial improprieties, he managed to make good on the one promise he could have hoped to keep.

It is in examining the administration of Kevin Johnson, however, that the cynical expectations of West and others are more seriously challenged. Johnson, as would likely be the case with virtually all political amateurs, absorbed numerous painful lessons during his first term in office. In his case, Johnson needlessly antagonized the city council with his repeated attempts to expand mayoral power and was forced to deal with the aftermath of several scandals related to his conduct prior to being elected to office. However, Johnson managed to be successful on a number of fronts, in part by grasping the tools of celebrity and using them to his, and the cities, benefit. For example, although

it came with a political cost, Johnson used his personal wealth from his professional basketball career, as well as his celebrity fortified fundraising abilities, to fund non-profit workarounds when the city council seemed likely to balk at initiatives the mayor wished to undertake, something a non-celebrity political amateur would not likely be able to pull off.

More impressively, Johnson managed to win over a skeptical business community, displaying an ability to capitalize on his connections in the world of sports to the advantage of Sacramento's economy. Johnson had campaigned on his ability to help transform Sacramento into a world class entertainment destination and he ultimately was able to deliver on the most important element of his plan by keeping the Kings in Sacramento, something which would almost certainly not have happened had Fargo been reelected. In doing so, he was able to cobble together a package which allowed for significant new construction in poorly developed areas of downtown, bringing with it jobs and new potential revenue for the city. Furthermore, he used his notoriety to secure millions in federal grants to improve city infrastructure, as well making significant strides toward expanding the range of revenue producing spectator sports in Sacramento.

It is certainly not my argument that either Bing or Johnson turned in flawless performances in office. However, I do not believe that either of them were the disasters which one might have expected, given the dire predictions of West and others as to how likely celebrity politicians were to bobble the reins of power. Relative to other political amateurs, it is difficult to see anything in the performance of their administrations which would rise to the level of constituting a threat to democracy. Indeed, in many respects, they may have performed their roles even better than a traditional political candidate

might have. When further considering the potentially positive contributions represented by their election to office, there seems to be ample reason to be optimistic about the potential of athletes-turned-politicians to make a positive impact on democracy in the United States.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The goal of this project has been to shed light on a phenomenon, the election of athletes-turned-politicians to office, which has been virtually ignored by the political science community. In examining the cases of two former professional athletes who, in defiance of conventional wisdom about electoral politics, were elected to office, I have attempted to establish a theoretical foundation upon which to base future research, both by myself and other scholars within the field of political science. In tracing the process of their election to office and performance on the job, it is my hope that it will facilitate additional study in subfields including American politics, political theory, and comparative politics.

It is my belief that this inquiry has illuminated numerous aspects of the interaction between celebrity, sports, and electoral politics:

- 1) That the pathways to success by celebrity politicians have been influenced by the fit between candidates and emerging campaign/media approaches
- 2) That the current fit between celebrity politics and ascending media has created conditions favorable to candidates with a background in forms of celebrity such as sports
- 3) That sports functions as an especially robust form of celebrity insofar as it taps into sources of bridging and bonding social capital, with potentially important political implications

- 4) That the experiences gained by athletes-turned-politicians provides them with a toolkit of skills and attributes which can contribute to success in electoral politics
- 5) That the increasing influence of sports in politics might transcend a simple signal of rejection of status quo politics, instead reflecting a source of meaningful agency by a restive public
- 6) That the skills possessed by athletes-turned-politicians once they have been elected to office can allow them to transcend the low expectations for job performance

It is my hope that this inquiry also might provide theoretical connections which might suggest additional questions worthy of consideration for future research regarding the relationship between sports and politics, such as the following:

- 1) If athlete-turned-politicians represent a distinctive strand of celebrity politics, is their electoral appeal likely to increase or decrease as the scope of the office changes from local (mayoral) to state (gubernatorial) and to national (Congress)?
- 2) If sports can demystify “otherized” populations as regard race, might such a mechanism provide potential relief for other victims of prejudice, such as women, GLBT persons, or persons of stigmatized ethnicity?
- 3) Can what we learn about athletes-turned-politicians be useful in understanding other, emerging forms of celebrity politics, such as the potential influence of military leaders, actors, and reality TV stars?
- 4) If sports can serve in the U.S. as a site of both bridging and bonding social capital, why has it appeared to not be the case in Europe and other parts of the world?

For too long, political science has neglected the study of factors such as sports on both implicit and explicit politics in the United States. It is my hope that this project will

help provide a foundation for the future consideration of cases and the testing of hypotheses relating to this emerging site of community, laden as it is with political implications.

## Notes

1 Morgenstern, Madeleine. 2013. "Red Sox Hitter David Ortiz' Emotional Speech at Fenway." April 20. <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/04/20/red-sox-hitter-david-ortiz-emotional-speech-at-fenway-this-is-our-fking-city/> (2014, January 28)

2 Frank Fitzpatrick, "A whole new playing field; ex-athletes jumping into political arena," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 25 July 1996, Page D-2, accessed at LexisNexis on 9/6/13.

3 Rhett Morgan, "Political Jocks," *Tulsa World*, 5 July 1998, Page B1, accessed at LexisNexis on 9/6/13.

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