

POLITICS IN SPORTS MEDIA: AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR ANNUAL REPORT

Michael L. Butterworth, Natalie Brown-Devlin, and Jennifer McClearen

TIME magazine's decision to [name Simone Biles](#) its 2021 "Athlete of the Year" centers the Olympic icon at a cultural and political intersection. A Black woman, who is the [most decorated athlete](#) in U.S. gymnastics history, became one of the most vocal advocates for mental health while also [processing the abuse](#) suffered by disgraced physician, Larry Nassar. In selecting Biles, *TIME* acknowledged the backdrop of "Black Lives Matter" protests in 2020 and the increasing chorus of voices within sports seeking to address mental, as well as physical, health. "So when a Black female athlete like Biles takes visible steps to safeguard her own mental and physical health, to indicate that it's worth protecting," [the magazine noted](#), "that action carries a special power." Indeed, given this context and the fact that both praise and criticism were directed at Biles, few other athletes can better represent the convergence of race, gender, health, and electoral politics.

We begin with Biles because *TIME*'s announcement provides a fitting invitation to consider the important issues noted above. Other athletes in 2021 provided a symbolic echo, from [Naomi Osaka](#) to [Serena Williams](#), from [Sha'Carri Richardson](#) to [Raven Saunders](#). And, while these women of color spotlight the politics of sports in particular ways, they are far from the only examples. In 2021 alone, sports and politics converged at international events like the [2020 Euro](#) and the [Tokyo Olympics](#), in domestic struggles over [legislation about name, image, and likeness](#) (NIL) for college athletes and the [exclusion of trans athletes](#) in high school sports, and in the intersection of [electoral politics in Georgia](#) and [the reactions by athletes](#) to the capitol insurrection on January 6. In short, after years of hearing that sports and politics do not (or should not) mix, it has become impossible to ignore the multiple points of convergence between them.

The ubiquity of politics in sports, and sports in politics, provides much of the motivation for this report. More than this, we seek to respond to the lingering questions about the nature of this intersection and whether it is possible or even desirable to "[stick to sports](#)." In "Politics in Sports Media," the Center for Sports Communication & Media aims to provide an annual assessment of political coverage in mainstream sports media. Our hope is that sports media professionals, sports fans, and sports scholars alike will find value in our findings and observations.

We begin with two important definitions: 1) what counts as "political"; and 2) what does "mainstream sports media" mean? First, for many observers, "politics" is most often associated with matters of campaigns, elections, and governance. We agree these are obvious examples of "political" matters; however, our definition is far more expansive, including

matters that focus on power, resources, and equity. From this perspective, it is not possible to separate politics from discussions of identity, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and more. In addition, we recognize that politics are embedded in sports' symbolic emphasis on national identity and the interdependence of sports organizations, media, and business. And, while this is certainly true around the world, we have limited our focus in this report to sports media coverage in the United States.

Second, defining "mainstream sports media" is equally complicated. There are almost too many sports media outlets to count, including those on television, radio, print sources, websites, social media channels, podcasts, and more. In the report's first two sections, our analysis is contained in order to keep our findings intelligible and we have limited our focus to ESPN, NBC Sports, CBS Sports, FOX Sports, Yahoo! Sports, and Bleacher Report. We have also included the sports-affiliated network brands of NBC Sports, CBS Sports, and FOX Sports. Yahoo! Sports and Bleacher Report, meanwhile, are among the most visited ([or even the most visited](#)) sports websites. Knowing that a comprehensive review of all major outlets was not feasible, we determined these media brands provided a strong foundation for our analysis. In the final section of the report, our authors draw on a range of sources based on the specific area of focus for each contribution.

In total, the "Politics in Sports Media" report contains three sections:

- Survey data that show how sports media consumers define and react to political content in sports.
- Survey data that show how sports media consumers perceive leading sports media brands and their mix of sports and political content.
- Case study commentaries that provide critical evaluations of six stories featuring politics and sports.

Our hope is that this report provides timely, accessible, and provocative information and insights. The relationship between sports and politics is neither new nor temporary, and we offer "Politics in Sports Media" to help readers observe, interpret, and critique the many ways this relationship shapes our understanding of 2021 and beyond. ■

In short, after years of hearing that sports and politics do not (or should not) mix, it has become impossible to ignore the multiple points of convergence between them."

**Read (and download) the complete
2022 Report: Politics in Sports Media**

Visit www.politicsinsportsmedia.org