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Wise, NA and Ludvigsen, JAL (2021) Uniting, disuniting and reuniting: towards a 'United' 2026. Sport in Society. ISSN 1743-0437

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Uniting, Disuniting and Reuniting: Towards a 'United' 2026

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Abstract: Co-hosting mega-events is not a new concept. It has been viewed as a strategic endeavour among nations to not only ease the cost of hosting, but to work on multi-national collaborations that go beyond underlying political and economic agreements. United 2026 is a successful FIFA World Cup bid led by the United States to co-host the event with Canada and Mexico. This commentary offers a cultural and political geographical discussion of this bid and the future mega-event. Some of the governance challenges include critically discussing the uniting of these three nations (based on the role of NAFTA and neoliberalism), contested points of disuniting (through the rise of right-wing political movements) through to an intended reuniting (through a shared mega-event hosting). This political and cultural journey of working towards a United 2026 event began in the early-1990s with the NAFTA agreement initially negotiated by George H.W. Bush and signed by Bill Clinton (as the economic binding of the USA, Canada and Mexico) through to Donald Trump's threats of a US withdrawal and what would ultimately be renegotiated as the new USMCA Agreement. This context provides some geographical/geo-political underpinnings for understanding the potential and perceived governance of a United 2026, following the longitudinal political history of uniting, disuniting and reuniting. Currently, given the geopolitical climate in North America, a united effort is (somewhat) contradictory to the current apartness that frames the current relationship between the USA and Mexico. But alternatively, a co-hosting approach can be viewed as working towards a new North American togetherness, at least in the sense of an event spectacle and imaginary. From a political geography standpoint, power relations will likely exist in a matter similar to that of NAFTA, but as events are promotion oriented opposed to production focused, it is expected that a newfound cultural connection could emerge amid evolving political disruptions using sport as a cultural driver.

Keywords: United 2026, USA, Canada, Mexico, Mega-events, Co-hosting

Introduction

On 13 June 2018 it was announced that the hosting rights for the 2026 FIFA men's World Cup were awarded to the Canada, Mexico and the United States. In the FIFA congress, the bid – promoted as 'United 2026' – received 134 votes, whereas the other bid by Morocco, received 65 votes (The Guardian, 2018). The successful bid has, indeed, already revealed a political and cultural frame attached to it. The US President, Donald Trump, known to be relying on 'Twitter-diplomacy' (Panke and Petersohn 2017), endorsed the United 2026 bid and tweeted the following on 27 April 2018: 'It would be a shame if countries that we always support were to lobby against the U.S. bid. Why should we be supporting these countries when they don't support us (including at the United Nations)?' (quoted in The Independent, 2018). Meanwhile, reacting to the successful bid in June 2018, United States Soccer Federation President, Carlos Cordeiro, declared that: 'Football is the only victor. We are all united in football' (quoted in BBC, 2018).

The two Tweeted perspectives showcase the complexities of being 'United'. Corderio considers the unitedness of sport, which is widely acknowledged (e.g. [Dolan and Connolly 2016](#) ; [Ein, 2018](#)), whereas Trump's quote seems to position the bid as being a 'US bid', that needed support, opposed to identifying the bid as a united one with its neighbours to the north and south. While it is beyond this paper to debate perspectives of Tweets, these do set the tone of the paper given the geo-political complexities of uniting, disuniting and reuniting that US, Canada and Mexico in the past three decades. As such, we look at how this may impact a United 2026 hosting amid current debates and new agreements.

Ultimately, what is unique about this hosting from a sport and events perspective is that this will be the first time that a World Cup is hosted by more than two countries. United 2026 will be the third time Mexico hosts a World Cup (having previously hosted the tournament in 1970 and 1986) and the second time for the US (having previously hosted the 1994 World Cup). Meanwhile, it is the first time Canada hosts the men's World Cup. Moreover, United 2026 will be the first World Cup for which 48 teams will qualify. In terms of the assigned games, at the time of writing, the US will stage 60 matches (including the final), Canada ten and Mexico ten. The mega-event is therefore marked by an inherent novelty in its tournament and geographical formats, making it an important case study for scholarly investigation.

Sport, Geography and the History/Politics of Co-Hosting Mega-Events

Since the work by published by Wagner (1981) and Bale (2003), there is an ever-growing and expanding focus on sport research that considers critical geographical perspectives (see Koch 2017; Wise 2015; Wise and Kohe 2020). Research on 'sport' and 'politics' has been addressed for some time (Vinokur 1988) and has a dedicated journal to the thematic area: *Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*. The scope of research on sport with a dedicated political geography has considered contested geo-political spaces (e.g. Shobe 2008), urban cultural realms (e.g. Sam and Hughson 2010), scale (e.g. Harris and Wise 2011), nation building (e.g. Koch 2013), geographical imaginations (e.g. Shears and Fekete 2014), fandom identities (e.g. Lawrence 2016) to recent work on relocations (e.g. Wise and Kirby 2020) and national allegiances (e.g. Storey 2020), as some examples. From this base, as even more defined focus of literature that considers, sport, politics and events has also been addressed (see Conner 2014; Lee 2019; Overton et al. 2013; Wise 2017; Wise and Harris 2019; Won and Chiu 2020), and is an area where more work needs considered even beyond this commentary that addresses the complexities and geo-political connections across future host-countries who united for a bid.

While work around this broader area has now been acknowledged, this section provides a socio-historical account of the co-hosting of mega-events. It will also unpack the politics of mega-events and co-hosting in the twenty-first century. As this commentary article argues, co-hosting must be critically approached as a strategic endeavour among nations to work on multi-national collaborations. Furthermore, the co-hosting of mega-events can also be seen in light of the enormous costs and organizational demands that are related to mega-event hosting, as captured by Müller's (2015) 'mega-event syndrome', which explains why mega-event planning rarely proceeds as planned. Co-hosting therefore allows nations and cities to bid for (and potentially win) hosting rights and thereby stage events, though at a lower cost and with less responsibilities than by acting as a single host.

In order to fully understand co-hosting, it is first necessary to contextualize the socio-political realities of mega-events within broader globalization discourses. For Roche (2000), mega-event hosting rights have, since the late nineteenth century, been pursued by cities or regions. Cities or countries, attracted by mega-events' global media coverage, have thereby sought to exhibit their cultural attributes and identities on a global scene. Simultaneously, mega-events have worked as vessels that push economic impacts, flows of investment and tourism. Furthermore, Roche (2000) argues that mega-events, historically and presently, are used on the international scene to promote dominant ideologies and to present global images of progress. It is also clear that, mega-events are staged for leaving a set of what broadly is defined as post-event legacies (Preuss 2007). This gives insight into the multifaceted nature and origins of mega-events.

More recently, scholars have examined how sport mega-events are used as tools for 'soft power' and brand building (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Chadwick et al. 2020). In the realm of international politics, 'soft power', coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the 'ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments' (Nye 2004, 256). 'Soft power' has subsequently been used to make sense of recent mega-events, including the 2006 FIFA World Cup, London 2012 Olympics (Brannagan and Houlihan 2014) and Qatar's 2022 World Cup (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Rookwood 2019). In this context, Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015, 705) also introduce the concept of 'glocal consciousness'. This explains:

[H]ow nation-states imagine themselves within the global context and position themselves vis-à-vis processes of globalization. Glocal consciousness underpins, for example, how national governments engage with global sport, most obviously when bidding to host sport mega events such as the FIFA World Cup or Olympic Games. Such events provide host cities and nations with exceptional opportunities to construct new, authorised brand identities before both their own citizens and global audiences (ibid.)

Additionally, sport mega-events can enable governmental and nongovernmental diplomacy in the pre-bidding and event planning (Lee 2019). Further, mega-events' security operations require significant transnational efforts and knowledge exchange (Author B; Klauser 2011). Thus, it is prudent to argue that sport mega-event hosting is 'never only about sports (Kowalska 2017, 81) and that '[g]lobal sport mega-events and world politics often intersect' (Lee 2019, 2). Broadly, mega-events can work as 'means of improving a nation's image, credibility, stature, economic competitiveness and (they hope) ability to exercise agency on the international stage' (Grix and Lee 2014, 522). As such, mega-event bidding and hosting are commonly tied firmly to economic ambitions and neoliberal processes (Andrews and Silk 2012). These processes are also highly politicized since mega-events can work as a political tool or strategy for nation states in the international system (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Grix and Houlihan 2014; Grix and Lee 2013). The intersection between mega-events and international politics remains highly integral as our paper proceeds to examine the politics and history of co-hosting.

Traditionally, mega-events have been hosted by one country (i.e. in the case of football World Cups or European Championships) or one city (most common for the Olympic Games). However, since the turn of the millennium, it has become increasingly usual that two nations – often sharing borders or located in close geographic proximity to each other – have co-hosted events. This means that the relevant event's hosting rights are shared between a set of nations. In 2000, the European Championship (Euro 2000) in men's football was co-hosted by Belgium and the Netherlands (Stott 2003). Two years later, the 2002 Men's World Cup was the 'the first ever to [...] be co-hosted by two countries' (Horne and Manzenreiter 2004, 187) when South Korea and Japan shared the historical

event's hosting rights. To date, this is also the only FIFA World Cup that has been staged in more than one country.

Six years later, Euro 2008 was co-hosted by Switzerland and Austria (Klauser 2011) whereas Poland and Ukraine hosted Euro 2012 together (Kowalska 2017). Notwithstanding, the meaning of 'co-hosting' took another turn when UEFA announced in 2012 that Euro 2020 would be hosted by no less than 12 co-hosting countries spread across the European continent (Author B). Euro 2020, which was postponed for 12 months in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Parnell et al., 2020), clearly had a political frame attached to it. It was branded as a 'Euro for Europe' and the official logo of the event consisted of European bridges that symbolically connected, or bridged, the European cities (UEFA 2016). In addition, there has been a number of unsuccessful bids from potential co-hosts. That includes 'Nordic 2008' (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden's bid for Euro 2008) (UEFA 2002) and Spain and Portugal's joint bid for the 2018 World Cup (BBC 2010).

An argument can be made maintaining that co-hosting of (or the plans/desire to co-host) mega-events has become a common and attractive concept in the realm of international sporting events in the twenty-first century. Yet, it still remains necessary to unpack in more detail exactly why nations may decide to co-host and how this links up to the aforementioned political or economic ambitions of mega-event staging. Additionally, co-hosting must not merely be seen as a process that occurs in the relatively short time period in which an event is actually staged; often between three weeks and a month. Co-hosting journeys begin years in advance and before an official bid for event hosting rights is formally submitted. We align some of these points here with evolving agreements between the US, Mexico and Canada, and with what happened between Japan and the Republic of Korea, we are perhaps reminded that what we are seeing unfold is not in fact new.

Co-hosting may be viewed in the context of a growing scepticism towards mega-event bidding and staging (Tallbot 2019). This again is highly connected with the sheer economic cost of mega-events (Dowse and Fletcher 2018), their associated construction projects and the issue of 'white elephants' and stadia that are not sufficiently maintained post-event (Horne 2007). As Horne (2007, 91) writes, 'one of the persistent public concerns is whether [mega-event] monuments can turn into "white elephants" and end up costing considerably more than they are worth'. This is something observed in both Brazil and South Africa where host cities saw venues constructed that had limited use after the event (see Maharaj 2015; Wise and Hall, 2017).

Evidently, cost concerns have deterred some nations from entering the bidding stage for mega-event hosting rights. Oslo (Norway), for example, pulled out of a bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics following concerns over high costs, after the Norwegian government voted against providing IOC with the necessary guarantees (Reuters 2014). Meanwhile, whilst the aforementioned Euro 2020 was both praised and criticised for its novel format, the decision to award the event to 12 hosts was also related to the 'the difficulty of finding countries with about 12 stadiums capable of hosting a competition of this size, which involve 24 teams' (Chappelet and Parent 2015, 11). This again implies a lack of interested hosts and may reveal a wider trend. Thus, co-hosting becomes one way to be a mega-event host whilst concurrently sharing the associated costs and responsibilities in a time of growing scepticism towards, and interest in mega events and their hosting rights.

Furthermore, there are some clear cultural and political dimensions that are tightly knitted to co-hosting or co-hosting bids. Essentially, co-hosting can be seen as a vessel to improve – or at least convey images of improved international relations and unifying efforts. For example, in the context of the 2002 World Cup, it was argued that the decision to award the hosting rights to South Korea and Japan was complex and 'provoked the formation of a fragile alliance' between two nations that

had an uneasy relationship 'still deeply tainted by memories of the Japanese annexation of the Korean peninsula in 1910 and the colonial oppression during greater part of the first half of the 20th century' (Horne and Manzenreiter 2004, 189). In this sense, Butler (2002, 55) contended that co-hosting 'encouraged the two countries to realise strengthened cultural ties' were necessary prior to the event.

Whereas this case demonstrates that a sense of collective connection or togetherness may have been worked towards, it also encapsulates how mega-event co-hosting – somewhat paradoxically – may take place amid uneasy, complex and tense international relations and geopolitical contexts (McLauchlan 2001). Against this backdrop, the concept of mega-event co-hosting raises a series of important questions in relation to the geographies and politics of mega-events. These speak, *inter alia*, to power relations and dynamics, unifying efforts and the broader political aims or ambitions that are pursued through the hosting of mega-events (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Grix and Lee 2013).

Towards a United 2026

A number of these questions re-emerged on 13 June 2018. It was then officially announced by FIFA that Canada, the US and Mexico had won the rights to host the 2026 World Cup (BBC 2018). The North American 2026 World Cup will be the second time that a FIFA Men's World Cup is hosted in more than one country. Meanwhile, it is the first time that a World Cup will have more than two hosts and a 48-team format. Arguably, this highly politicized case provides an opportunity to critically examine the cultural, political and geographical aspects of the United 2026 bid and further, to produce an outlook of the forthcoming World Cup. Fundamentally, the World Cup, as a tournament, is one of the largest and most mediated mega-events worldwide and each edition is regarded as a global occasion (Horne and Manzenreiter 2004). United 2026 provides not only a completely novel context for this mega-event, but a context that requests further scholarly examination.

The shadow of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is perhaps the underlying geopolitical motivation for three nations endeavouring on a joint-bid to host one of the worlds most celebrated mega-events, the Men's FIFA World Cup. Some of the governance challenges include the complexities of NAFTA which was signed in the early-1990s, an agreement initially negotiated by George H.W. Bush and signed by Bill Clinton (as the economic binding of the USA, Canada and Mexico). As countries enter a joint bid or host venture, economic and political disputes are not uncommon, especially considering that Japan and South Korea entered talks over disagreements and disputes in 1998, just a few years prior to co-hosting FIFA 2002, but after the bid to co-host was successful. That joint bid was also forged in the political shadow of an agreement between the nations signed in 1965, known as the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea. The mounting tensions in the lead up to the event (four year prior) saw a new Japan-South Korea Joint Declaration signed between the nations.

A similar story is unfolding between the US, Mexico and Canada here, as joint economic declarations that unite these nations has experienced turbulence. The making of the would-be NAFTA agreement is credited with discussions between the late US President George H. W. Bush and Mexico's president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The late Ronald Reagan, who preceded Bush as US President, had focused on an agreement with Canada entered into the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement in 1988. As talks between the US and Mexico began shortly after the US and Canada agreement,

Canada's then Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was concerned about what a US-Mexico agreement would do to the newly signed US-Canada agreement. So, Mulroney decided to seek involvement in the talks to consider the wider economic relations and impacts that would ultimately connect the three nations with the signing of NAFTA by Mulroney, Salinas and Bush and signed into law by Bill Clinton in December 1993.

The agreement would be the world's largest free trade agreement and would define the next wave of neoliberal ideology associated with economical liberalism and free-market capitalism. This agreement saw trade barriers and the ability to invest eliminated between the nations, and such a presence through economic liberalisation and mutual collaboration between nations led to a joint bid to host the FIFA 2026 World Cup, unveiled in April 2017 by the three nations football/soccer federations. Like the South Korea-Japan joint bid, a longstanding economic agreement in place for decades arguable cemented the desires to co-host, adding the element of spectacle to decades long agreements. Amid the geopolitical disruptions, sport and hosting did not absorb this narrative and instead focused on a new narrative of integration among nations for the good of promoting sport and concentrating efforts on play over politics (at least during the staging of the event).

Likewise, as we saw with Japan and the Republic of Korea, who won a joint hosting bid and then entered re-negotiations of their joint economic decelerations, the same narrative unfolded between the US, Mexico and Canada. NAFTA, which was widely criticized by current US President Donald Trump, is no longer in effect following a renegotiating of the agreement's terms. Trump's election was seen as a pivotable transition point in the unmaking of a decades long NAFTA agreement as it stood. While the initial phases of NAFTA renegotiations were met with criticism and concern over the binding future of the agreement, this along with threats that the US would 'walk away' and the months in mid-2018 when the US and Mexico entered bilateral talks with Canada not at the negotiating table. Similar to Japan and the Republic of Korea in the years leading up to their joint hosting, the US, Mexico and Canada reached the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) which would again cement the trilateral ties as of July 2020. The signing of the agreement between Trump, Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto and Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is the redefining of an agreement between the three nations that will set the tone in future elections in each country as abrupt change and uncertainty defines our contemporary times.

Future Considerations

Free trade agreements are founded on neoliberalism, with agreements sought between nations to seek an economic advantage. Such agreements as we see in the examples in this paper, can set the precedence for co-bidding and ultimately co-hosting mega-events. However, unlike the agreements and renegotiated agreement between Japan and the Republic of Korea, tensions, uncertainty and rapidly evolving and changing politics are contesting agreements, almost on a day-by-day or week-by-week basis. With concerns (and sometimes fears) over disuniting and the impact and rise of right-wing political movements around the world, sport and the hosting of events can be, at least conceptually, observed as an intended reuniting of nations whereby sport is a cultural coalescent that can transcend contemporary politics. This political and cultural journey of working towards a 'United 2026' event began in the early-1990s with the NAFTA agreement initially negotiated by George H.W. Bush and signed by Bill Clinton (as the economic binding of the USA, Canada and Mexico). The current politics and 'Twitter-diplomacy' of Donald Trump was seen as a potential disintegration of a new hosting union between the three nations. His threats of a US withdrawal,

after a relatively short period of time would ultimately be renegotiated as the new USMCA Agreement.

It is too early to undertake a full empirical analysis of the impact of United 2026, as any work could run the risk of being speculative or based on (perhaps) vague interpretations of a successful bid document. However, what this commentary contributes with – with its background, discussion and future considerations – is to set some precedence and context for what will come in 2026 in the years leading up to and the realisation of this mega-event. This context provides some geographical/geo-political underpinnings for understanding the potential and perceived governance of a United 2026, following the longitudinal political history of uniting, disuniting and reuniting, which could be seen again before the event is hosted and will depend on the outcome of elections and political majority views in each nation. And so, the United 2026 case may demonstrate *exactly* why global mega-events and (geo)politics are so intertwined (Lee 2019; Rowe, 2019) and why, as Rowe (2019) recently argued, there is a pressing need to persistently and critically examine sport mega-events academically.

Currently, given the geopolitical climate in North America, a united effort is (somewhat) contradictory to the current apartness that frames the current relationship between the USA and Mexico. But alternatively, a co-hosting approach can be viewed as working towards a new North American togetherness, at least in the sense of an event spectacle and imaginary if political agreements and disagreement were to arise again in the next 5 to 6 years. A key consideration is from a political geography standpoint, power relations will likely (and continue to) exist in a matter similar to that of NAFTA or USMCA, given the role of the US steering current agreement demands, and given in the event the US will host the vast majority of matches, including the finals. A key take-away here is whether uniting forged by events can be viewed as promotion oriented opposed to production focused. Therefore, one might expect a newfound cultural connection should emerge amid evolving political disruptions using sport as a cultural driver for uniting nations.

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