

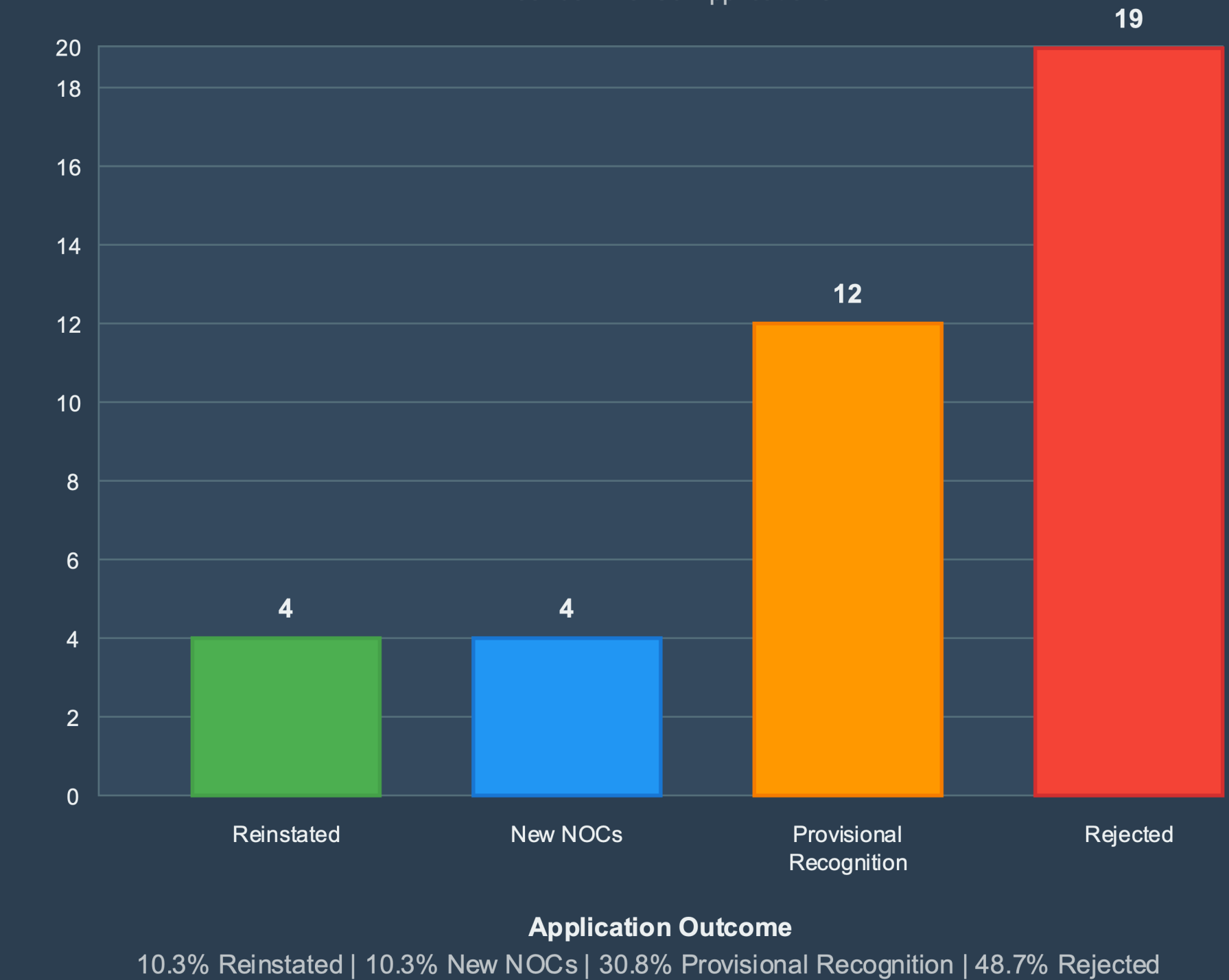
Barcelona '92: The New Europe at the Olympic Games

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INTRODUCTION

The 1992 Olympics were the first Olympic Games after the Cold War. Several major geopolitical events — the dissolution of the Soviet Union, signing of the Treaty on European Union, German Unification, agreement on a Czecho-Slovak “velvet divorce,” and the onset of the wars of Yugoslav succession — unfolded just months before the Barcelona Games. This made the 1992 Olympics a unique opportunity to imagine a “new” Europe and introduce it to a global audience.

National Olympic Committee Applications for Barcelona '92
Breakdown of 39 Applications



A PATH TO STATEHOOD

New and aspiring states viewed participating in Barcelona as a way to culturally differentiate themselves from their neighbors and former colonizers and make a case for national self-determination. Many applications failed, but Barcelona welcomed twenty new or returning Olympic committees. Lithuania was arguably the most successful case of leveraging international sport for political sovereignty. It gained its independence from the USSR shortly before the Games.



For information on
sources & methodology,
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How did the 1992 Summer Olympics shape & reflect post-Cold War geopolitical transformations?



NESTED IDENTITIES

Organizers had a challenge on their hands when it came to the ethnopolitics of the host city. Most residents saw themselves as Catalans, not Spaniards. The solution was to depict Barcelona as a place with nested political affiliations in official programming and literature: a part of Catalonia, which was a part of Spain, which was a part of the European Community. It was a delicate and sometimes tense balancing act. The greatest victory for Catalan nationalists in 1992 was convincing the International Olympic Committee to make Catalan the fourth official language of the Games.



A PEOPLE'S EUROPE

The European Community had existed in some form for over thirty years by the time of the Barcelona Olympics, but popular engagement was very low. As the Maastricht Treaty, signed in February 1992, set about to transform the European Community into the European Union, supporters of European integration bought a segment of the opening ceremony to “present the European identity to the world through the Olympic Games.” They wanted to give the EC a “more human image” and make citizens of the twelve member states more committed to political union.

CONCLUSIONS

- Geopolitical transformations changed which nations participated in the Olympics
- New & aspiring states believed participating in the Olympics would strengthen claims to statehood
- Analysis of Barcelona '92 opening & closing ceremonies reveals changing ideas about regional, national, and supranational sovereignty
- The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era for both the Olympics & Europe