

Measuring Merit
By
Daniel E. White March 25, 2024

I love the game of baseball. The business of baseball? Not so much.

My academic field is government and politics. It used to be fun to watch. These days? Not so much.

Tony Gwynn was a Hall of Fame baseball player. He was a graduate of San Diego State University, not a well-known baseball school like the University of Arizona or USC. Once he completed his college playing career and spent some time in the minor leagues, he became a member of the San Diego Padres Major League Baseball team. He spent his entire career with the Padres, signing a series of contracts that paid him well for his chosen occupation of playing a game for the enjoyment of it and for the enjoyment of fans as well. Such loyalty to one team and one fan base is hard to find these days.

He was elected to the Hall of Fame the first time he was eligible. Well he should have been. He won 8 batting titles, tied for the most in National League history. His career batting average was .348 and he never batted below .309. In 15 of his 20 years, he was voted to the All-Star game. He won 7 Silver Slugger awards and 5 Gold Gloves.

In all of his illustrious career, the cumulative total of his earnings was \$47 million. He retired financially comfortable, to say the least, after a 20-year career. His highest one season salary was \$6.3 million. Given the rate of inflation since 1982, Gwynn's highest salary, adjusted to 2024 dollars, would be \$20 million.

For 2024, the highest individual annual salary will be \$70 million, paid to Shohei Ohtani in the first year of a ten-year contract. Comparing dollars, then, Ohtani is 3.5 times more valuable than Gwynn at his peak. Ohtani is a fabulous player but 3.5 times more fabulous?

And have any of you signed a contract for ten years?

President Biden was once quoted as saying, "Don't tell me what your values are. Show me your budget and I'll tell you what your values are."

At least, though, what a major league baseball player is paid is based on performance. A player "merits" the salary on the basis of measurable data; hits, average, home runs, pitching wins, strikeouts, earned run average.

What if we applied a similar approach to determining whether or not a person holding political office "merits" election and the salary that comes with the elective office? There might be a whole lot more turnover in public offices if we used more than party affiliation or headlines grabbed as measures.

In our system of government, there are multiple forms of legislative office: city council, county board of supervisors, state legislatures, the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate.

What measures might be applied to people working in such bodies if we were interested in applying a performance "merit" system?

Some seem basic. Members of legislatures are also members of committees within the bodies. There are regular committee meetings to be attended as well as the formal sessions of the whole legislature. What percentage of meetings does the person being evaluated attend? Would we, as the taxpayers paying the salaries of the members, be reasonable in expecting that the expectation ought to be 100%?

The purpose of any legislative body is to make laws. There are several opportunities to develop data points here. How many bills has the person introduced? How many have made it to the point of a committee hearing? How many have made it to the floor for debate by the entire body?

The top statistic ought to be—how many bills has the person introduced that have been signed into law by the executive branch? How does the record of the member under review stack up against all other members of that legislative body?

Enacting laws for the benefit of the citizenry is the reason legislatures exist. As voters, wouldn't it make sense for us to know the data, to be able compare an incumbent on the ballot with other incumbents in terms of their accomplishing the purpose of a legislature?

I can hear political partisans howling. What if your party controls the legislature but the other party controls the executive? How could you fashion a positive set of statistics to support your re-election in such circumstances?

People of a Certain Age, I don't need to answer those questions, do I? But I will.

Talking to people who think differently than you do with the specific intent of finding areas of agreement is a great start. A recent Harris Poll, reported in the *Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 2024, reported that 76% of the people surveyed "see good in people with whom they disagree and 71% have "friends who hold views they don't share." So, voters might respond positively to leadership that worked with everyone in the legislature to find areas of agreement, not just party colleagues, and then to talk with the executive branch.

The incentive is to fashion a record of doing the job of legislating that earns the incumbent the "next season."

The amount of money paid to entertainers who play a game well for a living is staggering but at least the players are held to account by objective measures of performance—merit pay.

Food for thought in an election year.

Click here to send your comments to Dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com