

INTRODUCTION

This project began in 2014, and by the discontented spring of 2020, when colleagues would ask about the project, I would quip that the book made more sense back when we had democracy and baseball. That spring, it looked like the baseball season could be cancelled amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the botched response by an impeached president and administration that demonstrated a constant disregard for both laws and norms. As of this writing in November 2020, we saw the conclusion of a shortened baseball season riddled with indifference toward the health of the players and spectators. Joe Biden is President-elect, yet President Trump and many of his Republican colleagues refuse to acknowledge this defeat. It seems we do have baseball and democracy, each flawed and facing uncertain futures.

The main argument that I advance in this book is that our politics and our everyday pastimes are not separate. It should not be surprising, then, that both of these institutions, baseball and American politics, face similar problems. Wealthy baseball owners and elite politicians (who often receive donations from said owners) view their power as a means to wealth and more power. However, American politics is not primarily about leaders, just as baseball is not primarily about owners. Nearly 160 million people voted in 2020, and baseball derives its meaning far more from fans than owners, or even players. Nobody is compelled to follow baseball—they do so freely. Consequently, America's pastime is democratic, shaped by the people and not the few. However, saying that baseball is democratic does not necessarily mean that baseball is always good or healthy for democratic life. If, in baseball, democracy shines its clearest, we must admit that we do not always like what we see shining.

To understand a concept like democracy at the ballpark, it is imperative to keep these tensions in mind. Democracy is fundamentally about

possibility. As a regime built on equality and liberty, democracy is a goal and a promise that is often unrealized. The history of American democracy is largely a history of failing to live up to the founding ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Inherent in the democratic world is the possibility that democracy undermines itself, whether through the tyranny of the majority or the selection of a populist or authoritarian leader.¹ True moments of democracy can be rare, and people are not often brought in to participate beyond relatively infrequent events like elections and mass protests. As a result, everyday venues for politics in social life like sport are valuable windows into democratic life.

Baseball illuminates democratic politics by acting as a metaphor: sporting events and the way spectators and fans engage with them are representative and symbolic of how people view social and political issues. Taking sport seriously as a metaphor for politics explains why baseball's value to democratic life lies in its potential. Many times, anti-democratic visions of America have found support in the baseball world. However, baseball has also been a testing ground for projects more radically democratic than any politician could advance. The game reflects the people who care about it, for better and worse. Democracy at the ballpark suffers from the same drawbacks as democracy at the ballot box. To embrace such a concept, one must ultimately have faith in people, in fans, in citizens.

Taking baseball seriously as a political venue recognizes the importance of humble, small, everyday ways of thinking about politics. The game is quotidian, and surely most people participating in constructing baseball into a mass spectacle do not do so as a political statement. Going to a baseball game or following baseball through media is an average, everyday act. However, in these everyday acts, what people truly care about shines through. Democracy does not always unfold on the grand stage of routinized politics; it instead resides and grows in the small spaces, in the routine.

Given the high stakes of the current polarized political climate in America, one may rightly ask why a political scientist or theorist would choose to study something as seemingly frivolous as baseball in times as momentous as these.

The full answer lies in the rest of the book, but briefly I see in baseball a different possibility for American life and politics. Baseball reveals a different mode of being together than what national politics offers. Baseball provides a model of mutual respect between those that disagree. In baseball, there are not enemies, but rivals. Baseball requires respect for

rules and norms. Fans of opposing teams have more in common with each other than they do with those who do not follow the sport. The game gathers not only those with similar goals and desires but unites those with opposing wishes as well. Patience, care, attention, time—the game demands all of these, and much more. Fandom requires vulnerability and teaches people how to handle both success and failure. In short, the sport offers endless instruction in arts necessary for any successful democracy.

That these lessons are learned in the relatively low-stakes environment of something diversionary and fun like a sport only makes them more important. Democracy requires spaces where people can learn such lessons voluntarily. The alternatives are a lack of civic preparation or state-run programs that hamper democratic liberty, a cure worse than the disease. Democracy at the ballpark is not a cure all, the only, or even the best way of improving democratic life. Democracy at the ballpark presents the possibility of a different way of being together; it is a reminder of what we share, how freedom fosters things we love, how investment in something seemingly small can change one's life, and how caring about the stories we tell through sports can change our horizons.

This is a story about small things that matter. Throwing a ball very hard and hitting it with a stick is absurd. The physical acts that make up a game of baseball are often improbably silly. Yet, these acts are meaningful and taken seriously because people have decided they matter. Paying attention to that decision, why people decided baseball matters, what people see in the game, and how this relationship evolves, reveals much about the democratic mind and our own politics. This project explores these worlds of meaning that most political science and theory ignores.

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To make this argument, this book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter on spectatorship serves as a background for the rest of the project to understand how watching something like a baseball game matters for democratic politics. Spectatorship is a large and meaningful part of our everyday lives and allows realms like sport to serve as a metaphor for politics and a potential site of political action and change. Far from being diversionary or connected to tyranny, spectatorship allows spectators to foster independent judgment and empowers the viewer. This chapter will examine critics of spectatorship to show that these critics miss that spectatorship is not essentially dangerous by nature but has potential to be

a valuable part of democratic life as well. Sport and baseball is only one such arena that demonstrates spectatorship provides a political platform to other areas of everyday life outside of formal, elite politics.

Chapter 2 examines the relationship between baseball and community. This chapter examines different theories of community to understand the practical experience of being at the ballpark (or watching elsewhere) to show how baseball brings people together. This explication of being at the ballpark is the ground for an analysis of how this type of event can be the basis for building community. I show how teams can be desirable for building community if harnessed correctly by serving as reflections of their community and sites of displaying local concerns. I also examine how teams that focus exclusively on business and economics can actually undermine local community through exploitive practices such as holding cities hostage for exorbitant amounts of tax money. Spectatorship thus provides possibility for community that can be harnessed or undermined. I conclude by theorizing baseball spectatorship as a meaningful type of community that, although fleeting, has a resilience that outlasts the games themselves.

Chapter 3 examines baseball and equality, focusing on how baseball can both illuminate inequalities and exclusion, while also being a platform for contesting exclusion. I argue that baseball is one important way that Americans can watch the democratic dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in their everyday lives. I examine how who plays baseball, and thus who the crowd watches play, is significant toward understanding the American dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. I focus primarily on race in the sport, and then endeavor to show what baseball can reveal about gender and sexual inequality. I argue that these dynamics both reveal much about the nature of inclusion and exclusion, and show that inclusion and incorporation of groups entails more than simple legal equality. Baseball often reinforces existing inequalities but can sometimes challenge how fans see these inequalities: the sport can incorporate new groups into a team-based “we.” In short, I argue that, at times, baseball can be a mechanism for political and social change.

Chapter 4 addresses baseball and public virtue. The chapter examines contemporary virtue theory and ancient writings on the connection between virtue and athletics to understand how sport mixes with visions of virtue. I argue that while the state often has difficulty promoting virtues, baseball both reflects and teaches important social and political virtues. To make this argument, I look at the experience of playing baseball in Little League to argue that this experience teaches what I am calling

“Little League virtues.” These virtues provide a basis for understanding how spectatorship can later reinforce these early lessons. I then show how spectatorship of eras of morality, heroes, and villains can reveal and influence politics around virtue. Looking at the history of the game and its moral concerns is like reading the rings in a tree of American morality. I examine patriotism at the ballpark, which is a striking example of how public virtue is expressed or manipulated through baseball. And, finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on recent cheating scandals and what happens when the sport abandons any pretense of virtue.

Chapter 5 deals with the drastic change in sport and baseball from a pastoral game to an industry shaped by technology. I argue that baseball reveals a broader shift toward technological thinking. To understand this paradigm shift, I draw on writers like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, Hannah Arendt, and Eric Voegelin to argue that this shift toward technological thinking in sport is important because it indicates that such thinking has penetrated into democratic consciousness even in its everyday pleasures. As to how the shift manifests itself in the game, I trace the rise of technology in baseball, showing the continued desire for quantitative rigor brought into a realm usually believed to be the domain of chance, fate, and skill—the realm of the baseball gods. I argue that this shift is significant and indicates a drastic change in sport from its ancient roots in the sacred and the holy into the scientific realm of analysis and precision. I examine normative questions about the desirability of thinking of sport and players in terms of efficiency and production and look at public perception of this new breed of baseball and the political dimensions of this response. Finally, looking at how technological thinking is resisted in the game, I argue, is helpful for thinking about combatting this thinking in other areas of everyday life.

The book’s conclusion ties the chapters together to argue that examining baseball and politics shows that democracy is not confined to halls tread by elites and unseen by the masses. Instead, looking at baseball reveals how narrative and meaning emerge in everyday spaces. This ability to tell a story with sport, sport’s potential and power as a metaphor, shows how sport can be inclusive and democratic. I argue that this relationship between baseball and politics is normatively good: it shows that civic life can flourish in many ways. Democracy can unfold wherever masses of people get together and inject something with meaning. The long history and present popularity of baseball shows that it is possible to have democracy at the ballpark complete with contestation and community.