

Opinion: Comparing sports to politics

By Thomas Sowell

It has long seemed to me that there is far more rationality in sports, and in commentaries on sports, than there is in politics and in commentaries on politics. What has puzzled me is why this is so, when what happens in politics has far more serious effects on people's lives.

To take one common example, there are many people who believe that if the market fails, the government should step in. But, if Robinson Cano strikes out, does anyone suggest that the Yankees should send in a pinch hitter for him on his next time at bat?



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Everyone understands that a pinch hitter can also strike out, and is less likely than Cano to get a hit or a home run. But the very possibility that the government can fail when it steps in to substitute for a failing market seldom occurs to many people. Even among some economists, "market failure" is a magic phrase that implies a need for government intervention.

We could argue about the empirical evidence as to when government pinch-hitting is better or worse. But there is seldom even an argument at all in some quarters, where government intervention follows market failure as the night

follows the day.

Milton Friedman once pointed out, "A system established largely to prevent bank panics produced the most severe banking panic in American history." Many other examples could be cited where government intervention made a bad situation worse.

But most discussions of the role of government never even reach the point of looking for empirical evidence. Today, for example, there is much gnashing of teeth in the media because Democrats and Republicans can't seem to get together to create a bipartisan plan for government intervention to solve our current economic problems.

Those who cry out that the government should "do something" never even ask for data on what has actually happened when the government did something, compared to what actually happened when the government did nothing. That could be a very enlightening trip through the archives.

Sports statistics are kept in a much more rational way than statistics about political issues. Have you ever seen statistics on what percentage of the home runs over the years have been hit by batters hitting in the .320s versus batters hitting in the .280s or the .340s? Not very likely.

Such statistics would make no sense, because different batters are in these brackets from one year to the next. You wouldn't be comparing people, you would be comparing abstractions and mistaking those abstractions for people.

But, in politics and in commentaries on political issues, people talk incessantly about how "the top one percent" of income earners are getting more money or how the "bottom 20 percent" are falling behind. Yet the turnover in income brackets over a decade is at least as great as the turnover in batting average brackets.

In the course of a decade, the top 400 income earners include a couple of thousand people. The income received by the top 400 (as a statistical bracket) has risen, both absolutely and as a share of all income, even while the average income of the average person who was in that bracket at a given time has fallen by large amounts. How can this be? The short answer is turnover.

Turnover in sports creates no such confusion.

If players A, B and C all have batting averages in the .320s this year and, put together, they hit 100 home runs, while players X, Y and Z all have batting averages in the .320s next year, and together they hit 120 home runs, we could say that .320s hitters were increasing the number of home runs they hit. But A, B and C could easily be hitting less than 100 home runs next year.

It all depends on whether you are talking about what is happening in statistical brackets or what is happening to actual flesh-and-blood individuals who were in those brackets at one time but not another time. We understand that when we talk about sports statistics. But not when we talk about statistics on political issues like income differences.

Do our IQs just drop spontaneously when we turn to politics? Or are there many people in politics and the media with vested interests in misstating issues, and lots of experience in doing so? I think it is the latter, especially during an election year.

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