

MLB

Impeachment? U.S. Senators Can't Even Agree on Rooting for the Nationals

WSJ Sports took a roll-call vote and got a lesson in how Washington takes sides—or doesn't.

By Andrew Beaton, Ben Cohen and Louise Radnofsky

Updated Oct. 22, 2019 11:27 am ET

With the possibility of an impeachment trial looming over the Senate, there has never been a better time to ask every U.S. senator the question gripping the nation's capital:

Are you rooting for the Washington Nationals in the World Series?

This World Series between the Nationals and Houston Astros has D.C. in a historic frenzy. It's the first appearance for the Nationals since moving to Washington in 2005 and the first World Series in the U.S. capital since 1933. Surely they enjoy bipartisan support from 100 of Washington's most prominent semi-permanent residents, right?

Not exactly. It turns out getting a straightforward response from 100 elected officials is difficult even when the topic is baseball. Their answers couldn't be mistaken as coming from anywhere but Capitol Hill.

The responses to this simple question reflected the broader paralysis of this dysfunctional town. Some aides offered context about whether or not their bosses would be rooting for the Nationals—but only on background. A few senators filibustered with grandiose speeches. Others made transparent attempts to appease their home states by answering a question about baseball with quips about football. Mitch McConnell referred to his own memoir.

There were 69 total responses—more than enough for a Senate quorum.

But only 27 voted yea and supported Washington's baseball team. None of the others could root, root, root for the team in their home away from home. Of the three senators pulling for the Astros, two are from Texas.

“Now we have Texas vs the Swamp,” said Ted Cruz (R., Texas).

There were 19 who said they wouldn't stray from their favorite teams and therefore couldn't support the Nationals. There were 20 who abstained with indecisive responses to a yes-or-no question. There were also 31 who skipped the vote altogether.

The Yeas, Nays and Abstentions

How the senators responded to The Wall Street Journal's Nationals vote



Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Texas): "I was lucky enough to be in the stands with my wife and daughters to watch Altuve's walk off in Game 6 and I could not be more excited to see the Astros back in the World Series," said Sen. Cruz. "Now we have Texas vs the Swamp, Verlander and Cole vs. Scherzer and Strasburg. They're both great teams, and going to be one heck of a series, but my heart's with the Astros." SARAH SILBIGER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

1 of 13

A third of the senators represent states without MLB teams, and once they were allowed to qualify their answers by explaining their circumstances, a few of them openly admitted to supporting the Nats.

"I watched almost all the playoff games," said Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.). "The Nats could give the country a good lesson in teamwork."

A spokeswoman for Shelley Moore Capito (R., W.Va.) made it clear that the senator is no bandwagon fan. She actually attended games “back in the day” when Washington used to have a baseball team. The name of that team? The Washington... Senators.

There were five senators with other MLB teams in their states who confessed they were temporarily switching allegiances. “I’m rooting for the Nats,” wrote Debbie Stabenow (D., Mich.). “As a lifelong Tigers fan, I’d love to see Scherzer versus Verlander in the World Series!” She also had a politically acceptable excuse: The Tigers had the worst record in baseball this year.

The Astros being heavy favorites in the World Series did give some elected officials the cover they needed to take a definitive stance. They couldn’t pass up the opportunity to champion the little guy. “Steve is rooting for the Nats because they’ve never made a World Series appearance,” said a spokeswoman for Steve Daines (R., Mont.). “And of course because they’re the underdog.”

Jon Tester (D., Mont.) is not rooting for the Nationals simply because he lives in Washington. He has much deeper ties to his local team. Tester fell for the Montreal Expos in the 1980s, and he’s been following them ever since—especially when they moved and became the Nationals. “I hope they sweep Houston,” he said.

Mark Warner (D., Va.), who represents a broad swath of Nationals fans in Washington’s suburbs, went so far as to express hope that a divided town might come together over the walkup music of Gerardo Parra.

“Forty thousand people singing a children’s song in unison about a baby shark might be just what we needed to find some common ground in Washington,” he said.

But there’s a group of people who disagree with Warner about this quaint notion of a baseball team uniting D.C. They happen to be his Senate colleagues.

While few senators are definitively rooting against the Nationals, the rest of the nays aren’t rooting for the Astros. They just root for teams that aren’t in the World Series. A spokesman for John Thune (R., S.D.) sent a link to a tweet with the senator in a Dodgers jersey in a very Washington example of the tweet speaking for itself.

Then there were the senators who engaged in a time-honored bipartisan tradition of dodging the question.

Jim Risch (R., Idaho) is “first and foremost a Packers fan, but he also loves baseball,” his spokesman said. “When he meets with his Idaho constituents, he likes recommending that they check out Nats park.”

Jacky Rosen (D., Nev.) “is a baseball fan,” her spokesman said. “In fact she recently threw the first pitch at a Las Vegas Aviators baseball game and will be watching the World Series like any other baseball fan.”

Tom Cotton (R., Ark.) is “just looking to see some good baseball from both teams,” his spokeswoman said. “He’s a longtime fan of Major League Baseball and very much enjoys this time of the season. He does look forward to an exciting atmosphere in Washington D.C. during the World Series!”



‘Forty thousand people singing a children’s song in unison about a baby shark might be just what we needed to find some common ground in Washington,’ said Mark Warner. PHOTO: ROB CARR/GETTY IMAGES

Others in the Senate defied political pressure and refused to answer. Instead they chose to stick by their hometown teams—even if those teams do not play Major League Baseball.

“I’m pulling for the New Orleans Saints,” said John Kennedy (R., La.) “When they play in the World Series, call me.”

“I’m a Minnesota Twins fan,” said Tina Smith (D., Minn.). “Now that they are done, I’ll be rooting for the Minnesota Vikings.”

“I just don’t understand the question,” said Ben Sasse (R., Neb.). “The World Series already happened in June when Vanderbilt beat Michigan in Omaha.”

In an even more Washingtonian response, a spokesman for Angus King (I., Maine) said he didn’t have time to respond. He was too busy with “policy talk.”

It should also come as no surprise that Red Sox fans were eager to let us know that they were Red Sox fans. They could have been a powerful voting bloc, but not even politicians with the same baseball leanings from the same party saw this issue the same way.

“They won’t be playing the Red Sox, and we Vermonters feel a connection to the former Expos,” said Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), who is rooting for the Nationals.

“Who are the Washington Nationals? Is that a farm team for the Red Sox?” said Sheldon Whitehouse (D., R.I.), who is not.

“When the Red Sox aren’t playing, Senator Markey roots for anyone not the Yankees,” said a spokeswoman for Ed Markey (D., Mass.), who is rooting for the Nationals and the Astros.

One senator even made the connection to the only question in Washington that might be more divisive than the issue of Nationals fandom.

Doug Jones (D., Ala.) is a big fan of the Yankees—the team the Astros eliminated on their way to the World Series. When he was asked on Friday about his World Series rooting interests, he wouldn’t commit to a position until he watched the proceedings unfold.

“Just like his response has been on possible impeachment,” his spokesman said, “he cannot comment until all the facts are in and the Nationals’ opponent is determined.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What is your prediction for the World Series? Join the discussion.

Write to Andrew Beaton at
andrew.beaton@wsj.com,
Ben Cohen at
ben.cohen@wsj.com and
Louise Radnofsky at
louise.radnofsky@wsj.com