

A New Voting System for the Hall of Fame

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This year the Baseball Writer's Association of America (BBWAA) [failed to elect](#) anybody to the Baseball Hall of Fame. This was partially because all time greats such as Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens were linked to steroid use, while other strong candidates like Jeff Bagwell and Mike Piazza were, fairly or not, rumored to have used steroids, too. The steroid issue, however, only partially explains why nobody was elected to the Hall of Fame. The other major reason is that the voting system used by the BBWAA is flawed.

The current system allows voters to list up to ten players on their ballot. Players listed on 75 percent or more of the ballots win election to the Hall of Fame. Those who do not make 75 percent, but who get more than 5 percent, are kept on the ballot for another year, and can remain on the ballot for up to 15 years. Players who receive less than 5 percent of the vote are dropped from the ballot for good, although they can become eligible for the veteran's committee special ballot after several more years. One major problem with this system is that once it gets backlogged, as it is now, it is very hard to change that. In the next few years, due to this back log, there will be more than ten very strong candidates on the ballot, forcing voters to make tough choices. More significantly, this may also lead to mid-range candidates being dropped from the ballot after only one appearance. This is what happened to Kenny Lofton this year.

The Hall of Fame uses what is known as a multi-vote multi-member (MMMM) voting system, albeit a modified and quirky one. All voters get up to ten votes and up to ten people can be elected. Some of the problem with this system is that all votes are treated equally. There is no way for a voter to differentiate between a vote for a player who they think is an all time great, such as Greg Maddux, who will be on the ballot next year, and a player like Lofton who is worthy of more consideration, but not an obvious choice, particularly if there is a crowded ballot. As a result, all votes are treated the same and voters have few tools at their disposal.

The clear advantages of the system is that it does not fix the number of people who get elected every year, and that it is relatively simple. The former is probably a positive, but the second may not be so important. It may be that a more complicated system which demands more from voters might force them to spend more time on their ballot and make choices more carefully.

Given that the vote is unlikely to be taken away from the BBWAA, and that doing that would create a number of new problems and questions, fixing the mechanics of the voting system is probably the best approach for getting a better Hall of Fame selection process. A better voting system for the Hall of Fame, would leave some variance in the number of people elected each year, allow voters to give more preference to some players and award those players that enjoy the most intense support. A voting system that does these things will not be simple or perfect, but it would be an improvement over the current system, which is not only flawed, but likely to create more problems over time.

One way to create a voting system that will accomplish this would be to keep the MMMM approach, but modify it so that each voter has 100 voters which can be divided among up to 100 candidates. Obviously, no voter would divide their votes that way, but this policy would lead to some interesting possibilities. A voter could put all 100 of her votes on the best player on the ballot, or on their personal favorite. Another voter could put 25 votes on the top four players, while a third could give ten votes to ten different players.

This system would also have a different way to decide who would get into the Hall of Fame. Every year, the three players who received the most votes, as well as those who either appeared on 75 percent of the ballots or who got 75 percent of the votes, would be elected. Realistically, this would probably mean 3-5 players a year which, given the backlog, the increase in eligible players due to expansion and the financial interests of MLB and the Hall of Fame, is probably about the right number.

This system would also allow voters to vote to keep a player on the ballot for future consideration without taking votes away from other candidates by allowing players who are either mentioned on 5 percent of the ballots or who receive 5 percent of the overall votes to remain on the ballot. Thus, for example, a voter could give ten votes each to the six top candidates and five votes to eight candidates who they believe deserve future consideration, or 20 votes each to the four top candidates and five votes for four players to remain on the ballot. There are obviously numerous other ways to divide votes and make this point.

This system is, like every other voting system, imperfect and vulnerable to manipulation. It is conceivable, for example, that a group of voters could put all 100 of their votes on a controversial candidate like Jack Morris and catapult him to the Hall of Fame. However, a voting system that makes it possible for voters to make more nuanced choices guarantees that at least some people, and possibly more than a few in some years, are chosen, and requires voters to think through the math a bit more is not a bad way to start.