

WHY SO, NEGATIVE?

By

Jeffrey A. Richards

How long was I asleep, exactly?

Until this debate season, it had been more than a decade since I judged my last round or coached a policy debate team. It had been since the mid-90's, when I published my textbooks on debate. It is now time, my publishers suggested, that we look at updated editions. So I began volunteering as an assistant debate coach at a local high school in suburban Seattle, and judging tournaments nearly every weekend. Turns out, my publishers were right: much has changed in the debate world since I donned a suit and tie and stood at the lectern at the front of the college classroom to argue the benefits and detriments of increasing foreign investment. Customs changed when I wasn't looking (tag team debate; the proliferation of conditional counterplans); new argumentation developed (since when have we started spelling the word "critique" with a "k?"); judging philosophies evolved beyond easy definition. In many cases, these changes are neither good nor bad, just a growth of the competition, and it was merely my job to research, understand, and adapt; to catch up, as it were.

But in the case of contemporary negative strategy, I am still struggling to understand what happened. Let me be more specific.

The Lack of Spread

In the late '60s and early '70s (before my time in debate), affirmative teams began to find that they gained a strategic advantage by

starting their first constructive speech with their plan and then arguing advantages over the status quo, which implicitly or explicitly included sub-points about harms, significance, inherency, and solvency. This radical change from the Traditional Needs case to the much-more-common Comparative Advantages case meant that affirmative teams were arguing both the case and the plan in their entirety in the first affirmative constructive. This was an advantage to the affirmative, because whatever the negative did not respond to in its first constructive was assumed to be accepted by both the negative and the judge, at least until the 2NC. On paper, entire portions of the affirmative's arguments appeared to go un-refuted for most of the round.

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Negative teams, however, did not immediately make adjustments. Right into the '90s they mostly stayed with the traditional breakdown of the 1NC attacking the need for a change, meaning the inherency, significance, harms, and any topicality arguments, and the 2NC attacking the plan's solvency and leveling disadvantage attacks against the affirmative. Some negatives eventually found a tactical

advantage against the affirmative tendency to advance both their case and their plan in the 1AC if they argued off-case (plan) attacks in the 1NC, since those arguments tended to be more generic and prepared before the round. The 2NC was then used to present on-case attacks against the affirmative justification for a change, giving the negative maximum time to prepare very specific attacks on the affirmative case and advantages. This division was very unusual and was at one time referred to as the Emory Shift, as it was first employed as a tactic by negative debaters from Emory University.

Today, negative teams have started to also present their entire palette of arguments for the round in their first constructive. Baylor University's Dr. Richard Edwards notes: "The traditional approach to this task [presenting reasons opposing the affirmative case] is to have the first negative speaker focus on a direct point-by-point refutation of the first affirmative speech, leaving the second negative speaker to present disadvantages and other off-case arguments. It has become customary for the first negative speaker to present the whole of the negative position, including any topicality positions, harm attacks, inherency attacks, solvency attacks, and disadvantage shells" (p. 76).

There is a serious downside to this strategy. Negative teams choosing not to run new arguments in their second constructive speech rob themselves of much of the value

of the Negative Block, the combined 13 minutes of second constructive / first rebuttal time that the 1AR has to cover in five short minutes. The affirmative structural advantage in a policy debate round is that it gives the last speech; the last impression to be left will be the affirmative. The corresponding negative framework advantage is that it has a block of time with which to overwhelm the 1AR. This concept is referred to as a Spread.

By choosing to present all of the negative arguments in the 1NC, the 2NC is left to reconstruct the arguments torn down by the 2AC, and this infringes on the ground the 1NR otherwise would be covering. It is my experience that this results in the 1NR reiterating the reconstruction arguments covered in the 2NC. Moreover, even if the 2NC and 1NR find a way not to “step on each other’s toes” by dividing up reconstruction, the 1AR now has a much larger amount of time to prepare her responses before she has to give her speech, as she has seen every argument the negative will use to attack her plan 16 minutes into the round.

The Absence of Clash

Negatives now presenting all their arguments for the round in the 1NC have caused many debaters (and critics, I fear) to see “a negative case.” And treating the negative arguments as a whole – a single entity of arguments which, when taken together, disprove the resolution – has resulted in the alarming tendency for negatives to feel no need to clash directly with the affirmative case.

On this year’s high school policy resolution – “Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase alternative energy incentives in the United States” – I have seen myriad topicality arguments, disaster-impact

disadvantages, and kritiks, all flowed and argued off-case. But only very rarely have I seen a negative disagree with the specifics of the warrant for a need for a change.

Yet this would be so easy to do. For example, many affirmative alternative energy incentive case advantages presented to me this year relied on a decrease in climate change from global warming by decreasing the use of fossil fuels. Not once have I heard direct negative arguments which indict the affirmative global warming harm data as unreliable, dependent on inaccurate forecasting models, or the product of political influence. Yet all this evidence was available to me upon very minimal research. Moreover, there appears to be credible evidence that the planet goes through climate cycles of heating and cooling as a natural phenomenon, regardless of human activity. At very least, I would have expected negatives to question timeframes for the impacts of global warming, so we can get an idea of how exigent the problem is, or how significant the advantages would be.

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Another affirmative advantage often claimed is energy independence. I would have expected to hear negatives challenge the need for being totally dependent on domestic sources of energy. The significance of the problem the United States (and the world) faces from depleted resources may be overstated by affirmatives, who claim we will soon run out of oil as an energy source. To be sure, the amount of petroleum we have is finite, but so is everything else. A

little research demonstrates that our primary energy source a couple of centuries ago was wood, which was replaced by coal, which was in turn replaced by oil. Moreover, in the early part of the last century, the U.S. government indicated that there were likely only 60 billion barrels of oil in the world; now we guess there are about 3 trillion, assuming no new extraction technology or resource discoveries are found. There are arguments to be made here that our current petroleum supply will last a long time, giving the status quo ample time to move to the next source of energy.

Nevertheless, negatives are choosing to run off-case attacks instead of directly attacking the affirmative justification of a need for change. With few arguments applied on-case, and most of the substantive debate occurring on negative flowsheets, the negative gains the strategic advantage of controlling the arguments in the debate round. Unfortunately, by doing so the negative also yields presumption to the affirmative, similar to a counterplan. This is because the judge is not left questioning whether there is a need for a change in the status quo: He assumes it, based on the uncontested affirmative case. The negative instead relies on its “case” to disprove the affirmative, to show it is not topical, is guilty of failing to justify a word or two in the resolution (like why the federal government should be the actor), furthers the perpetuation of a terrible and unjust world situation, or accrues disastrous disadvantages.

The Wide Open Affirmative Target

There is little excuse for failing to clash directly, what with today’s affirmatives, on balance, providing such an easy target. In not a single tournament round I have judged this year have I heard a logistically

well-developed affirmative plan (although I have heard extensive IAC admonitions that potential counterplans need to be “full text” and conclusions that future affirmative speeches will “clarify,” as needed). Instead, affirmatives I have seen (and voted for, mind you) have typically included one or two sentence “plans” that were really nothing more than vague notions. On this year’s incentives for alternative energy resolution, one elimination round I judged included an affirmative plan which advocated in its totality “the extensive and widespread use of ocean energy as a supplement to fossil fuels, where feasible; funding through appropriate means.” No explanation of whether the affirmative was relying on tidal power technology or thermal energy conversion, or some other type of ocean energy. And no explanation of where the large sums of money required for building such facilities were going to come from (e.g., a tidal barrage between Wales and England is estimated to cost the equivalent of \$22 billion).

Affirmative plans of a mere decade ago included the traditional planks: agency, mandates, enforcement, funding/staffing, and implementation (fiat required for plan success, like the repeal of conflicting legislation). Negatives used to be quick to pounce on underdeveloped plans as not being specific enough to

achieve solvency (or workability). But modern negatives prefer their own prefabricated “cases” to attacking deficiencies in the affirmative plan. The presumably-unintentional consequence of this is that the negative allows the affirmative to fiat solvency. Kenneth Grodd noted: “[W]ell-explained and carefully constructed plans would allow the debate over solvency to be informed and specific. In contemporary debate, solvency is argued so generically that negatives usually ask the critic to flow it separately. This reveals clearly that the argument, perhaps too generous a term, has nothing really to do with what solvency should have to do with, the connection between the proposal and the resolutorial goal.”

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Conclusion

Almost inevitably, when my high school debate partner and I would win a coin flip and have the choice of which side to take, we would choose negative. There was something exciting about directly responding to the positive logic of another person, matching wits to see who was more clever, analytical, persuasive. And used properly, the negative block

was an advantage many affirmatives could not overcome. The negative experience was more often than not primal, raw, almost feral in its spontaneity.

Much of the joy of “going neg.” appears to be gone, given what I have seen and read.

I am hesitant to join the chorus of the growing number of coaches and critics who have called for a return to the “good ole days,” if for no other reason than my distaste for being seen as a dinosaur. There are many aspects of contemporary debate that I am fond of, or am at least willing to adapt to. However, it is my sincere hope to soon be able to see a revitalized negative approach to policy debate that emphasizes clash and seizure of the opportunities provided by the negative block, the affirmative warrant for a change, and its underdeveloped plan to get us there.

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ⁱ I recall being advised by one critic to announce our intention as the Negative to employ the Emory Shift before the round, so as not be abusive to the Affirmative.

ⁱⁱ Edwards, Richard E. (2008). *Competitive Debate: The Official Guide*. Alpha Publishing House: Royersford, PA.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Backing for Severn Barrage Power.” *BBC News*. April 21, 2006. Retrieved December 28, 2008 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_east/4927744.stm.

^{iv} Grodd, Kenneth P. (1999). The Decline of Affirmative Plan Construction: A Source of Concern in Contemporary Debate. *Rostrum*. Retrieved on December 28, 2008 from <http://www.nflonline.org/Rostrum/OctNinetyNine>.