

THE LINE BETWEEN POLICY AND VALUE DEBATE: NOTES FROM THE NATIONAL CIRCUIT

by
Jeffrey A. Richards

In 1996, the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) – the largest organization of intercollegiate team debate in the United States – moved away from propositions of value and began using policy resolutions. But long before then, I recall the in-round arguments inching away from pure considerations of value toward quasi-policy implications of accepting the resolution. Value objections (V.O.s, for short) were the value debate cousins of disadvantages in policy rounds, imagining the terrible impacts of the practical implementation of the value advocated by the affirmative. Counter-resolutions developed as almost-counterplans to the assumed implementation of the affirmative version of the resolution. This trend toward policy-inspired arguments in value debate rounds should have been fairly predictable, since there were decades of policy theory for value debaters to draw on, and virtually none for value debate at the time. Similarly, some in the current high school debate community have warned against the tendency of Lincoln-Douglas debate – the high school iteration of value debate – to become too much like policy debate when LDers speak too quickly or rely too heavily on evidence instead of analytics.

It seems that now, policy debate is taking pains to return the favor.

Most debaters compete in local competitions in or near the city where their high school is located.

There is, however, a small subset of high school debaters, often from elite, private, preparatory schools, which travels around the country to tournaments that are commonly referred to as the “national circuit.” I recently had the privilege of judging policy debate rounds for the high school tournaments at Stanford and Harvard, held during the first two full weekends of February 2009. These national circuit tournaments featured some of the best and brightest policy teams in the country. There are, of course, many tournaments on the national circuit, including the Glenbrooks in Chicago, the Barkley Forum at Emory University, and the Greenhill and St. Mark's tournaments in Texas. You can tell which ones they are by the preeminence of the TOC bids they harbor. Stanford and Harvard happen to be a week apart in February and attract teams from all over the country.

As a former CEDA value debater in college, I was struck by how much national circuit policy debate has come to resemble some of the essentials of value debate. Plans have collapsed into what is now largely a general notion, similar to the value advocated by value affirmatives. Kritiks -- which were born in CEDA value debate rounds twenty years ago -- dominate negative strategy in policy debate at the national circuit. And policy negatives at the national level routinely make inconsistent arguments, any one of which if successfully proven will disprove the

affirmative case and plan, but which are not compatible with each other. This is a break from a long standing policy tradition of consistent advocacy on behalf of the status quo or a counterplan, and owes its evolution to the influence of hypothesis testing against the resolution in value debate.

Don't Sweat the Plan Text

First, it has been commented that policy plans are increasingly brief. To use an example I encountered in an elimination round at Stanford, the affirmative advocated “the extensive and widespread use of ocean energy as a supplement to fossil fuels, where feasible; funding through appropriate means.” Up until a decade or so ago, plans advocating ocean energy would take 45 seconds to 2 minutes to explain the agency (who would be accountable for the change), mandates (details, like whether the affirmative was relying on tidal power technology or thermal energy conversion, or some other type of ocean energy), enforcement (the power to implement, held by the agency), funding (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), and implementation (fiats). But today's national circuit plans are very brief, indeed, and are better characterized as general ideas that the affirmative wishes to advocate and then invoking “normal means” of implementation.

This is ground normally claimed by LDers. Value debate is pre-policy, by definition. More than one value debate round has seen affirmatives argue against negative value objections that the disadvantages of implementation were premature, since the precise method of implementation has not yet been suggested. Rather, the resolution rests on evaluation of the general idea being advocated. As such, affirmative value debaters have the responsibility to represent the resolution in general (or risk a negative “whole res” topicality attack), while policy affirmatives, on the other hand, merely have to demonstrate that their plan falls reasonably under the resolution.

The typical high school negative response in national circuit policy rounds to this plan compression is to run an “a-spec” argument. a-spec, or agency specification, arguments are jurisdictional, similar to a topicality attack. As such, many judges struggle to vote for them, since thresholds are typically higher on arguments that call for the judge to intervene and call the affirmative out of bounds.

This argument might be better presented by negatives as solvency presses against the plan, which is not specific enough to truly evaluate solvency or workability. Solvency arguments more easily attract normal scrutiny, as they do not call for judge intervention and a conclusion that one team is abusing the other.

The Increasing Domination of Kritikal Analysis

Second, many policy rounds at national tournaments, particularly at the varsity level, have demonstrated a propensity to favor kritikal analysis. I judged several rounds at Harvard and Stanford with 6½ to 8 minutes of INC time spent on eco-fem, capK, Heidegger, and eco-Buddhism, just to name a few. All of these philosophical frameworks argued for

either the debate-ballot-as-real-world-advocacy against the implied-but-abhorrent features of the affirmative case or plan or for an a priori, vote-here-first jurisdictional.

Of course, there is nothing new about Kritiks. But their dominance over traditional on-case attacks against warrants for the need for a change continues to grow on the national circuit. This is not surprising, since it is a de facto negative case, prepared and refined long before the round.

Once again, high school policy debate takes much of its lead here from the realm of value debate. Many of these kritik theories grew up in college CEDA debates in the 80s and early 90s as extended value objections with disaster and dehumanization impacts from adopting the resolution. I remember advocating increased visibility for third parties in Presidential elections and encountering an eco-feminism critique stemming from the fact that much of my evidence came from Daniel Mazmanian and others: entrenched, white male Political Science professors who advocated moving away from a two-party system. The unintended-but-devastating impact on the environment from using WASP masculine advocacy was not evident to me before the round, and I was ill-prepared for what I considered to be ad hominem attack. Turned out that such philosophical objections not only grew to predominate CEDA value debate rounds but later spilled into intercollegiate NDT, and then high school policy rounds.

Inconsistent Advocacy is Now the Norm

Third, policy negatives have moved to employing a strategy of inconsistent advocacy as a matter of course. Once, nearly all negative teams accepted that they were advocates of the status quo,

or occasionally, of a non-topical counterplan that solved the problem better or with net benefits over the affirmative plan. Either way, negatives were consistent advocates of a system. It was rare for negatives to argue inconsistent arguments, and when they did, they heavily blocked the framework on the front end, taking the time to move the judging paradigm to hypothesis testing (à la Northwestern University’s David Zarefsky) or tabula rasa before running multiple or conditional counterplans along with case presses.

This is no longer the case. At both Stanford and Harvard, all but two negative teams I encountered in 17 policy debate rounds ran conditional counterplans or K alternatives while still punching defensive holes in the affirmative technology’s solvency or the need for a change. And every one of them did so without thinking twice, even though it meant that the negative was providing better-solving alternatives for ills which did not need curing and using technology that was not going to work anyway. Affirmatives get in on the fun, too, often perming counterplans as a test of competitiveness rather than defending their plan against all takers.

Inconsistent advocacy, now the norm in negative strategy, also got its start in value debate. Propositions of value are tested at the resolitional level, and any counter-justification more persuasively argued by negative teams was considered grounds to reject the resolution. Value debate rounds focused on competing values (sometimes many), rather than two competing policies, and as such were more friendly to hypothesis-testing against the resolution.

Conclusion

Much of the argumentation that develops in high school policy debate does so at the national circuit level first. These debaters attend summer

camps, work off of sophisticated briefs, cut volumes of cards, and debate statistically more tournaments than other high school policy debaters. Materials used at the national circuit level inevitably find their way into the hands of local debaters throughout the season and are incorporated into their cases and arguments. What began as a competitive strategy advantage for a few becomes the zeitgeist for the many. It therefore behooves coaches and debaters, regardless of their feelings about the national circuit, to pay attention to

the arguments that gain popularity at these tournaments.

If the current trend toward collapsed plans, kritikal argumentation, and inconsistent advocacy continue at national circuit tournaments, we can reasonably expect the line between value and policy debate to blur widespread. If that happens, we may need to rewrite the textbooks and theory articles to more accurately reflect the argumentation in contemporary policy debate and discuss its implications for debate education, judging paradigms,

and the rise of alternative formats for competitive debate.

(**Jeffrey Richards** is the author of two debate textbooks published by National Textbook Company (now McGraw-Hill): *Moving from Policy to Value Debate: A CEDA Handbook* (1992) and *Debating By Doing* (1995). He is currently one of the coaches the policy and Lincoln-Douglas debate programs at Sammamish High School in Washington State.)

NFL Summer Workshop Program

2009 Scholarship Sponsoring Summer Forensic Institutes

For the most up-to-date list and to apply, visit www.nflonline.org/CoachingResources/CoachWorkshops

Bradley University Summer Forensics Institute
Peoria, IL
July 12-25, 2009
Events: Speech/Interp
www.bradley.edu/continue/sfi

Capitol Classic Debate Institute
Loyola College, Baltimore
July 12-25, 2009
Event: Policy Debate
www.capitol-debate.com

CDE National Institutes
University of New Mexico in Albuquerque
July 15-July 31, 2009
Events: Policy, LD, PF, Interp
www.cdedebate.com

Florida Forensic Institute/National Coaches Institute
Fort Lauderdale, FL
July 17-31, 2009
Events: LD, PF, Speech/Interp, Congress
www.ffi4n6.com

George Mason Institute of Forensics
Fairfax, VA
July 25-29, 2009
Events: Speech/Interp/Congress
www.gmuforensics.org/gmif

IDEA Global Advocacy Institute:
Focus on Climate Change; Dikili, Turkey
June 28-July 18, 2009
Events: Debate, Journalism
www.idebate.org/advocacyinstitute

James Madison Univ. Speech/Debate Institute
Harrisonburg, VA
June 20-July 3, 2009
Events: All NFL & Poetry, Prose & Impromptu
www.jmu.edu/commstudies/images/JSDI_Brochure.pdf

Kansas State Wildcat Debate Workshop
Manhattan, KS
July 5-26, 2009
Events: Policy
www.k-state.edu/debate

Liberty Debate Institute
Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
June 21-27, 2009
Events: Policy, LD, Congress
www.liberty.edu/debate

Mean Green Workshops
University of North Texas, Dallas
June 21-July 4, 2009
Events: Policy, LD, Public Speaking
www.meangreenworkshops.com

Nebraska Debate Institute
Southwest High School, Lincoln, NE
July 24-Aug. 1, 2009
Events: Policy, LD, PF
www.nscta.info/ndi

Oregon Debate Institute
University of Oregon, Eugene
Aug. 2-16, 2009
Events: Parliamentary/Public Debate
oregondebateinstitute.wordpress.com

Spartan Debate Institute
Michigan State University, East Lansing
July 6-11, 2009
Event: Policy
www.debate.msu.edu

Sun Country Forensics Institute
St. George, UT
July 12-25, 2009
Events: Policy, LD, PF, Speech/Interp
www.dixie.edu

The Championship Debate Group
St. Edward's University, Austin, TX
July 26-31, 2009
Events: Policy, LD
www.thechampionshipgroup.com

University of Texas-Austin Speech|Debate
Speech: June 24-July 8; Debate: June 22-July 12 or July 14- Aug. 3, 2009
Events: Policy, LD, Speech/Interp
www.UTDebateCamp.com
commstudies.utexas.edu/clubs/UTNIF-IE

Victory Briefs Institute
University of California, Los Angeles
Aug. 9-22, 2009
Event: LD
www.vbi09.com

Whitman National Debate Institute
Walla Walla, WA
July 19-Aug. 7, 2009 (1, 2 or 3 wks.)
Events: Policy, LD, PF
www.whitman.edu/rhetoric/camp