

What Should Debate be About?

DEBATE

**The outcome of the plan's enactment
should be the focus of the debate.**

by Michael Greenstein

Last year alone, while judging high school and college debate, I have probably judged at least two hundred Policy rounds. In all of these debates, the question of "what the framework for the debate should be" has come up more than seventy-five percent of the time. The problem is common; I have talked to many judges about what they hear in Policy debate rounds as they relate to framework. Regardless of whether judges lean toward Policy debate, kritik debate, or do not care what is debated, they all share the common sentiment of hating framework debates because all framework debates are the same: everyone reads the same stale, poorly impacted 2AC block which ends up being largely irrelevant to the round. Since the question of what the debate should be about seems fundamental to every single debate round, the judging community's hatred for framework debates must be irritating for debaters. This article aims to provide a basic view of what debates should be about. This view seems obvious, yet is rarely if ever articulated by affirmatives in framework debates.

The outcome of the plan's enactment should be the focus of the debate, not the entire 1AC or its framing. To win the debate, the affirmative should have to prove the plan would *cause* (not *justify*) a world better than the status quo or a competitive alternative. The negative should have to prove the plan would *cause* (not *justify*) something worse than the status quo or a competitive alternative (of course there is still and should be debate about presumption, but that is an issue separate from the point of this article).

This framework for debate is good for a few reasons. First, it provides a stable focus for the debate. The plan does not change; it is a stable text. The rest of the 1AC, the first affirmative's representations, and the way affirmative frames the 1AC

is not static, but constantly changing. The 1AC is only eight minutes long and is by no means a complete or accurate picture of how the affirmative views the world. To hold the affirmative accountable for something that is unsubstantiated and inexplicit about their advocacy or beliefs seems unfair and irresponsible. This stable focus, of course, provides the negative with a constant target to attack throughout the entire debate.

Second, alternative frameworks create bad models for quality, educational decision-making. Not only would an alternative framework allow a judge to reject the affirmative even though he or she knows the plan is a good idea, but it would also allow a judge to vote for the affirmative even though he or she knows the plan is bad idea (because the way it was framed was good). This creates irrational decision-making that would never and should never occur in the real world.

Third, this framework allows for critical arguments. In fact, in this framework, the distinction between "critical" and "policy" arguments seems relatively silly; if the argument responds to the plan and proves why the plan would cause something bad, then it is a relevant consideration for the ballot no matter what type of argument it is. For example, if the negative could win that the way the affirmative represents something would cause policymakers to enact the plan poorly, then the judge should evaluate that particular argument. Of course, the specificity of the negative's claim would likely determine how much weight a judge assigns to a particular argument, so claims like "the plan causes serial policy failure" would likely not be valued as much as a specific affirmative solvency claim since "serial policy failure" (absent a specific example or more explanation) is vague and amorphous.

Fourth, who cares what the 1AC justifies? Really. During framework debates, many students frequently argue that the logic

and framing of the 1AC is the logic of the Holocaust. Students come up with various reasons that have no adequate warrant or evidence to support their claims. Some are as absurd as "affirmatives try to create the most strategic policy possible and Hitler created the most strategic Holocaust possible, therefore the affirmative justifies the Holocaust."

People can always find reasons why the logic behind a policy or the framing of it is analogous to the logical or framing of a bad historical event (especially if judges continue to accept and value these weak assertions). In any event, these are not reasons why the plan would cause something bad to occur if implemented and therefore should not be considered by judges when evaluating debates.

My hope is that the aforementioned comments will create discussions among debaters and judges about making and evaluating arguments regarding the purposes of the debate. This by no means is a comprehensive defense of why debate should focus on the outcome of the plan's enactment or my view of how debate has to (or should) be; it is merely a suggestion for how affirmatives can alter their framework arguments to be more unique and perhaps more useful. Since questions of what the debate should be about are important, debaters need to find better ways to convince judges to vote on them or even listen to debates about them at all. ■

About the Author

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