

THE D G E



POLITICS, POLITICS, POLITICS by David M. Cheshier

The national debate circuit seems agreed for now on these propositions relating to the politics disadvantage (specifically this year, the Bush agenda arguments):

1. Fiat does not permit the affirmative to escape specifying the manner by which their plan will be passed and the president's involvement in passage.

2. Though the likely threshold connections between mental health policy passage and other Bush initiatives (like war in Iraq, tax cut passage, or stem cell research prohibitions) are widely thought very high, simply saying so on the affirmative will get you nowhere without high quality evidence offering unusual uniqueness arguments.

3. The fact that in some circumstances arguments relating to the plan's likelihood of passage are dismissed out of hand (as illegitimate "should/would" or repeal claims), the Bush politics argument is worthy enough on its merits to ignore claims it should be dismissed as "should/would."

4. Counterplans implementing the plan but which vary or differently specify political processes of implementation are theoretically legitimate.

5. Critiques of political disadvantages arguing they should be ignored because they perpetuate political cynicism and horse race politics, fetishize today's Lexis-Nexis downloads, or disable grassroots oppositional movement formation are interesting but not, finally, compelling.

6. Although all these predispositions make politics positions easier for the negative to win, we're mostly bored with politics debates and wish they would occur less often.

Of course exceptions to all these generalizations abound. I heard about several high quality teams debating at MBA and Emory who got mileage by defying the conventional wisdom as I've presented it. Nonetheless, these predispositions taken together have produced a circuit-wide reliance on politics arguments disproportionate to its quality as an argument given Bush's present (admittedly slipping) popularity and his domination of the national agenda. It has thus become more and more difficult to decisively win a politics debate without either a specific link turn related to the affirmative plan, or an in-depth commitment to a strategy of turning the impact, whatever it is. However much judges say they hate it, the politics position is as entrenched as ever, at least on the high school circuit — ironically, on the college treaty law topic the Bush argument has faded somewhat in popularity as the year has progressed.

Several years ago I wrote a column reviewing some of the literature based constraints relating to politics disadvantages as then argued; I won't rehash the claims I made there again (February 1999 *Rostrum* — the president was different but the arguments remain). Apart from wishing for a higher degree of fidelity between the presidential politics arguments made in debates and those made in the academic literature, I have no intrinsic opposition to "politics" as a genre of argument. But I do want to offer some tactical suggestions that might improve the situation for teams frustrated by the dominance of day-to-day political positions. None of the following particulars are rocket science. But what continues to surprise me is how many talented teams persist in debating politics the same as always, and how little novelty I see in strategies used to attack and defend the disadvantage. In that spirit I wish to open the conversation about politics strategy.

Affirmative Teams Should Consider Starting the Politics Debate in the 1AC

The politics position presents many difficulties for the typical affirmative. Because the potential links and impacts come in numerous forms, unless one listens closely the label "Bush" or "politics" can obscure a universe of conflicting positions. It does not take very long for the 1NC to read the typical politics shell — because it is so common, judges are used to hearing only three or four pieces of evidence. Thus the time trade-off consequences for the second affirmative constructive are biased negative, and this is especially so given the regularity with which second negatives expand their original sketchy positions.

In every other category of argument except for topicality where the risks run this way, affirmatives have compensated by reconceptualizing the first affirmative constructive. 1AC's are regularly filled with critique preemptions and now even with evidence anticipating the state counterplan. But for some reason it is rare to hear a 1AC modified in anticipation of politics. Although teams will sometimes insert a decision rule (e.g., they'll insert a card saying we must "reject utilitarian decision making"), when's the last time you heard something like "Advantage 2: Passing the plan expends Bush's political capital which lessens the risk of Iraqi war"? This bias should be reconsidered.

You may be shaking your head at this suggestion — why would anyone want to commit in the 1AC to a particular politics scenario? And why should the affirmative so totally shift the

debate away from mental health claims? But the idea makes sense, especially if your explicit strategy from the start is to impact turn politics anyway. Why not decide where the strongest link evidence is, connect it to the strongest consistent impact claim, and put it in the first speech? Doing so forces your opponent to reconsider their default strategy, enables a major head start in the card count, and frees 2AC debaters to competently cover the issue. And if you're going to be stuck spending all your last minute time doing politics research, why not earn some regular mileage out of it when you're affirmative?

Still, the thought that the 1NC will simply read ten one-card reasons why President Bush needs political capital to implement his many good ideas will deter some debaters from running a 1AC politics argument. My point is simply this: teams eager to engage such a debate were probably going to rev it up in the 1NC anyway.

If you don't want to claim a politics advantage, then there are still ways the 1AC can be fortified. Consider scattering decision rule cards that favor you all over the first affirmative (obviously that is advice inconsistent with the idea of claiming a politics scenario). Think about hiding uniqueness cards wherever they make sense, as they often do when attached to inherency and harm contentions. That is, use the inherency position to craft as complicated and well supported a uniqueness position as possible.

Many teams are undoubtedly deterred from the 1AC manipulation I'm recommending because of what seems like the infinite variability of the politics shell. Why load up the first affirmative with evidence regarding presidential agenda-setting if the negative plan is to make an approval rating claim? But too much is made of this threat — in actual practice the multiple link versions have conflated. This is so both because the literature and fact situation makes it harder to sustain popularity claims, and therefore links debates are now centralized on political horse-trading, winners-win, and agenda-setting claims that are consistent with each other and which can be commonly answered without fear of contradiction.

Some affirmative teams make tactical and strategic modifications to strengthen their case against politics. It has become more common for the 2AC to answer politics last in the speech, since that often denies prep time to the 2NC. Some very formidable teams are now in the habit of making politics the hook on which they hang all kinds of essentially unrelated add-on arguments. And all along the smartest teams tightly scripted a huge flurry of 2AC answers designed to put pressure on the negative block. I suppose the theory is if the 2NC plans to spend time on politics, one may as well make it as tough as possible. But these are simplistic accommodations to a situation calling for a competitive situation requiring responses more drastic.

How Negatives Can Overcome the "Politics is a Lie" Presumption

Since the whole point of my essay is that the field has decisively tilted toward the negative on politics-related positions, I won't say too much about defending politics. But if you happen to debate in a region where my generalizations are plainly wrong, in a place where judges are increasingly hostile to what they see as contrived political scenarios, then I want to summarize some common but good advice about defending them.

One basis for hostility regarding Bush politics arguments is their insufficient development in the first negative shell. The trick of offering ambiguous link and uniqueness claims so as to pre-

serve maximal 2NC flexibility to retell the story as necessary is now so ubiquitous that it doesn't fool anyone anymore. Meanwhile, the visceral antipathy to two or three card shells mounts. Ironically, this is the easiest bias to counter. Instead of reading one link card, consider reading three. Make up the time by highlighting down the nuclear impact card. This is a smart trade-off, in my view, since 2NC's will almost always be pressing the link debate more fully than the impact; if the 2AC simply impact turns, you still have the preferred abbreviated nuclear language in the round. The point is to find ways to add cards to the shell without calling special attention to the fact you've done so — for instance, I wouldn't number the additional link arguments. But when you're extending the link with new evidence at the top of the position in the block, you can huffily remind the judge that the 1NC read *three* link cards in the shell.

Of course in extending the politics position one can work, usually successfully, to overcome the bias against it held by the judge. Here's an example: You can safely predict that at least some, and maybe most, affirmatives will make a series of arguments attacking the viability of the link or uniqueness claim. Because this is the very aspect that seems most suspect to many judges, these claims must be literally overwhelmed in the negative block. Often I recommend that at the first available opportunity ("2AC #1: No link"), the 2NC read as many tightly highlighted links back as possible. You say you only have two links, and both were read in the shell? No problem: expand the link story by adding evidence that actually reinforces the later internal links. Even if the link evidence is not exactly on point, that is, you can still overcome a presumption against the position by answering a "no link" claim with a run of nine efficiently marked pieces of evidence.

In debates I see where the affirmative strategy is to simply impact turn politics, I'm regularly surprised by how unprepared the 2NC is to efficiently respond. The 1NC says the plan enables Bush to buy off Democratic support for oil drilling in Alaska, which they say will decimate local species diversity. The 2AC responds that buying off Democratic support is good because Bush's tax cut and Iraqi disarmament proposals are good and need Democratic help.

What usually follows is some scenario where it's clear the 2NC just grabbed the "tax cut" and "Iraq" files and pulled impact cards saying the opposite, without any thoughtful combination of other answers that would question the internal links, thresholds, and other aspects of these new scenarios, although each incurs a wholly different set of political outcomes than the basic ANWR story.

Conclusion

My suggestions are basic. But lest I lost you by insulting your intelligence, I'll conclude with the overall point I aim to stress. Politics positions have taken over. This dominance is likely to continue since political arguments have supporters, since the major evidence sources (the handbooks, trading, Planet Debate) will continue to feed the beast, and since topic writers seem unwilling to draft resolutions that would obliterate or complicate political claims (why not this? "Resolved: Setting aside the political implications for the U.S. President's broader agenda, the United States should..."). Meanwhile, many of the obvious possibilities for affirmative response are foreclosed by the prevailing winds of opinion on the national circuit.

Do politics arguments win every major debate? Of course not. But the time has come to diversify our ways of handling politics-based claims, and the ideas I've advanced here are a most rudimentary starting place. While racing to stay one step ahead in card cutting and one trick ahead on the link will always serve experienced teams well, start thinking about the other avenues available to pressure the negative when politics is their inevitable argument of choice.

Next month: An introduction to the new policy debate ocean's topic.

(Dr. David M. Cheshier is Assistant Professor of Communications and Director of Debate at Georgia State University. Dr. Cheshier will host the 2003 Lincoln Financial Group/NFL National Tournament at Georgia State University. His column appears monthly in the Rostrum.) © David M. Cheshier