

FORUM

THE CRISIS IN POLICY DEBATE

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Policy debate is rapidly declining. One main cause for this decline is the presence of incomprehensible argumentation and speaking. The incomprehensibility problem in turn can be traced to a failure of judges to act as educators and enforce minimum standards for argument development. In order to answer this problem, judges should choose the role of argument critic and intervene in the debate process to demand certain minimums of effective argument. This process could be facilitated by the creation of an organization of debate coaches that would establish general norms for judging behavior.

Academic policy debate is in a state of crisis. By virtually any measure we are experiencing a significant decline in participation in NDT debate. Subscription rates in all districts are down significantly. Tournaments that once boasted a hundred plus teams now struggle to attract fifty entrants. Regional tournaments often attract so few teams that no sort of power pairing scheme is permitted. The experimental expansion of the NDT in 1987 was, at least in the short run, a failure. Only fourteen teams applied for the ten available second round at-large bids. We are left to wonder if the tournament would have been substantially different had open participation been permitted. If present trends continue, we will have to reduce the size of the tournament, not in response to demands to make the qualifying process more rigorous, but instead because of a lack of interest among potential participants. In short, at both the regional and national levels, NDT debate is very sick, perhaps dying.

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To this point, discussion in debate circles of various means to rekindle interest in policy debate has focused primarily on program oriented participation problems and rules for defining appropriate debate practice. Much has been said about the kind of institutional problems that directors encounter when trying to get a new program started or when rejuvenating an older program. Little attention has been paid to the systemic problems which discourage participation. Our purpose here is to address a problem with the present product of debate that contributes significantly to the crisis in debate, argumentative incomprehensibility, and then explain how the problem can be traced to a failure of judges to act as educators.

While the decline in participation in policy debate has been influenced by budgetary and other institutional problems, we believe that a variety of entry barriers also have limited the capacity of this form of debate to attract and sustain student and programmatic participation. One entry barrier limiting participation consists of a variety of irrational techniques that make it difficult for new debaters and new programs to compete. Too often zeal

for winning debates encourages incomprehensibility, poor evidence analysis and comparison, and a lack of argument explanation. Virtually no one in policy debate denies these charges. Even the coaches of the most elite teams agree that many debaters speak incomprehensibly and that the quality of argument development is often slighted in favor of quantity. To many outside observers the practices that are common in NDT debate (and which are becoming far more common in CEDA) seem absurd. Moreover, the practices effectively discourage all but the most committed coaches and debaters from participation.

We believe that the main cause for the abuses we have identified is the willingness of the judging community to reward irrational practices. Rather than rejecting unexplained arguments, incomprehensible positions, and unqualified sources, judges too often spend time reconstructing the arguments that were made in a given debate. Judges sometimes take as much as an hour and a half reading and rereading evidence after a debate. Effectively, judges take the debate out of the hands of the debaters, and end up relying almost exclusively on their own interpretations of the evidence read in the debate. This process provides debaters with little incentive to argue and speak clearly.

Unfortunately, no solution to the problems is evident. To put it simply, regardless of rules, debaters are unlikely to control the problem themselves as long as they continue to be rewarded for sloppy debating practices with high points and wins. After all, their number one concern is winning debates. We can not expect debaters to take a long term perspective on the activity in an environment that is inherently competitive. Furthermore, efforts at structural reform have failed. The normative standards governing debater and judge behavior for the NDT are observed at few invitational tournaments and at the NDT itself judges and debaters

alike have been known to openly mock them.

At this point it is important to recognize that over the last two decades the purpose of debate has changed. Earlier in this century academic debate was an activity designed to teach students persuasion skills in a citizen-advocate model; we aimed at producing responsible and involved citizens who would be able to influence others effectively. Recently, debate has evolved into an activity designed primarily to teach argument and policy testing skills that can be applied in specialized forums requiring detailed research and analysis. Debate is now aimed at sharpening the research, critical thinking and organizational skills of students so that they can become effective advocates before government commissions, courts, and other decision-making bodies. In short, contemporary debate stresses argument skills where it once focused primarily on persuasion and public speaking.

Our goal here is not to encourage debaters to abandon argument in favor of persuasion and public speaking skills. Rather, skill in argument should be defined to include a clear public presentation. The increased demands for skill in information processing and analysis in our society mean that there can be no substitute for sound argument in academic debate. Our point is that the irrational practices currently emphasized in academic debates are not useful for teaching the argumentative and analytical skills which are the aim of the system. The emphasis on the quantity of arguments and evidence, regardless of their quality, seems to have left no room for argument development and comparison, source qualification challenges, and attention to the manner in which arguments are delivered.

The state of affairs we have described suggests that an alternative conception of the role of the judge in contemporary debate is in order. The problem, we

believe, lies not mainly in debaters, but rather in the failure of debate judges to recognize their academic responsibilities and control harmful practices. Judges serve two functions in debate: impartial critic and teacher. In recent years, the first function has overwhelmed the second. Judges have focused on fairly resolving debates, while largely ignoring the educational effects of some of the practices that their refusal to intervene in the process was encouraging. This result has occurred because academic debate judges, like all human beings, prefer praise to blame. In order to minimize criticism from debaters and other coaches, judges have been pressed into publicly condoning (with their ballots) practices that they otherwise would reject. Originally, as a community we required debaters to adapt to judges. Admittedly the emphasis on judge adaptation had unfortunate effects since some judges undoubtedly imposed personal biases on debaters. The recent trend has produced an opposite result—a situation where judges are required to adapt to debaters. A judge who refuses to vote on an incomprehensible argument is labeled a “neanderthal.” Judges who accept unevicenced challenges to counter-intuitive positions are similarly chastised. A judge who consistently applies educational standards will be “struck” by many teams, because it is easier to avoid the few judges who require adaptation. In short, a judge is only permitted to hear debates if he or she is willing to accept conventions imposed on the system by debaters. Judges who refuse are effectively excluded from the system.

In order to resolve this role conflict, we suggest an alternative notion of the relationship between debater and judge. We believe that the debate process implies a social contract between debater and judge. To be certain, the judge has certain responsibilities. He or she should give a fair hearing to all of the arguments introduced into a given debate, setting aside

personal biases on those issues. In addition, every judge has the responsibility to work hard and give maximum effort to understanding the arguments made in a debate.

However, these judging responsibilities necessarily imply a reciprocal set of responsibilities for debaters; in short judges ought to impose certain requirements on debaters. Put simply, judges should require debaters to explain cogently, adequately contrast their positions with those of their opponents, cite specific sources including qualifications and speak clearly. Positions that are partially or totally incomprehensible because of speaking or poor development should be evaluated negatively or ignored. We believe that too few judges require adequate argument explanation and comparison from debaters. Too often, judges allow themselves to be put into the position of reconstructing debates in order to determine a winner. We believe judges should play the role of argument evaluator, not argument reconstructor. We should reject this latter role and commit ourselves to the the pedagogical aims of argument criticism.

Another way of making this point is to note that a professional advocate would not waste time examining evidence for positions that were not reasonably explained in the first case. A legislator would not spend time reviewing the arguments and evidence on a particular proposal if the evidence were not presented in a reasonable manner. Similarly, the Chief Executive Officer of a major corporation would not waste time sifting through evidence concerning a corporate project if that evidence had not been presented in a coherent fashion. Former debaters very quickly learn in law school or private practice that undeveloped argument, poorly explained reasoning, or incomprehensible speaking will not be rewarded or often even considered. If policy makers took the time to go back and reconstruct

incomprehensible arguments, then policy advocates in the real world would face the same incentive as do debaters. Could one even cite a single example where the testimony of a witness at a hearing or in a court received careful attention, even though it was impossible to understand? At a certain point it makes sense to tell the advocate that his or her position is so poorly developed that it doesn't merit attention in its current form. If anything this conclusion is far more true of an educational activity like debate, than it is in the real world, where it occasionally might make sense to consider an incomprehensible position, because that position might contain an important idea.

To achieve the educational goal of the debate situation one must begin with responsible judging. If, as a judging community, we hope to train professional advocates, then we must impose requirements on debaters that are similar to the responsibilities that they will encounter in other fields. In short, if debate is to continue to fulfill a valuable educational role for participants, then we ought to strive to teach real world argumentative skills, and those skills require comprehensibility, explanation, analysis of evidence quality and comparison of the relative merits of the positions in a debate.

Here, it must be admitted that application of the minimum standards we have described could result in judge intervention in the debate process or even bias. We suggest, however, that this problem is unavoidable. When a judge decides a debate by rereading fifty or a hundred pieces of evidence, he or she is intervening in the process. In many ways, currently we have the worst of all possible worlds. The failure of judges to demand adaptation from debaters produces irrational practices, but because those practices require the judge to reconstruct the debate, the result is actually significant judge subjectivity. We believe that intervention is far more desirable when it is

based on minimum and relatively objective standards for verbal and argumentative comprehensibility. Judges have tried to avoid the responsibility for evaluating arguments by limiting their judgments to a *tabula rasa* evaluation of all that was said. The result is judge reconstruction of debates, a process that in fact is more subjective (although that subjectivity is hidden) than would be the simple application of standards for comprehensibility.

Consistent with our call for a revision in the role played by judges in academic debate, we believe that it is important to create a professional organization for debate coaches. The purpose of this organization should be twofold. First it would enable coaches to establish certain general guidelines for appropriate judging. Second, and more importantly it would provide the peer support necessary for judges to follow these guidelines. The goal of the organization would not be to establish a large number of prescriptive rules dealing with debate practices. Despite our own predispositions, for instance, we would oppose any rule banning conditional argumentation. Nor are we arguing for a rule prohibiting judges from reading evidence or banning some other practice. There are undoubtedly instances when it makes sense for the judge to call for evidence to check context or accuracy or simply because he or she made a mistake. The need is not for rules (they have been tried and failed), but for a fundamental change in our view of the judging process itself. We need to recognize that debate practices will change only if the judging community makes a concerted effort to change them. We need a statement of norms for judging behavior relating to issues like comprehensibility and the need for fairness not in order to restrict judge behavior, but in order to provide judges with social support in order to stand firm and demand that debaters meet educationally desirable minimums.

Finally, judges should be encouraged to

hand out judging philosophies before each debate. The provision of judging philosophies would provide debaters with advance warning about judging predispositions. Of course, we do not expect debate to change overnight. One reading of a new judging philosophy is not going to teach debaters the advocacy skills that we have described here. But if a large number of judges begin to hand out philosophies emphasizing advocacy skills, then change will soon follow.

And it is far more effective for the judge to hand the debaters a specific judging philosophy listing practices that are unacceptable than it is to rely on judging philosophy booklets, such as the one passed out at the National Debate Tournament.

Judging philosophy booklets have failed to influence debaters, because of the pressure placed on judges by debaters and coaches. If the role of judge were reoriented, as we have suggested, judging philosophy statements could be much more effective.

Taken together, the steps we have outlined—a re-orientation of the role of judge brought about by a professional organization of debate coaches, and increased use of judging philosophy statements—could help change the state of academic policy debate. The result could be that debaters and coaches alike will strive to give the judging community what it wants: reasoned argument presented and explained in an understandable fashion.