

**Parliamentary Debate Topics for the  
"Highly Educated" College Student  
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Forensic educators choose debate as a competitive educational activity because it uniquely incites students to do research and to learn to prepare, present and defend their arguments. If students would work as hard to learn these important skills on their own, then there would be no need for or unique advantage to competitive debate. Those of us who have been involved in debate as students and/or educators have experienced significant advantages of debate over other educational approaches in accomplishing these educational goals.

The National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA) was formed, in part, because of a sense that Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) and National Debate Tournament (NDT) debate practices overemphasize evidence and research at the expense of the communication aspects of debate. The constitution of NPDA stipulates:

The purpose of the National Parliamentary Debate Association is to provide collegiate and other student debaters with opportunities to debate various topics using the parliamentary format. The Association will promote competitive practices which ensure the long-term growth and survival of

intercollegiate, academic, and public debate by promoting a form of limited preparation debate which combines an emphasis on both content (analysis, refutation, context) and delivery (style, wit, humor, audience adaptation, vocal attributes and body movement), and which remains consistent with international styles of parliamentary debate. (Article II, Section 1, 1993)

By forbidding the use of quoted material in competition and emphasizing the knowledge that the student brings into a tournament, NPDA goes far toward the goal of achieving argumentation and delivery balance. We argue, however, that the current NPDA standards for determining whether a specific case approach is acceptable go too far in the direction of encouraging a communication and persuasion emphasis at the expense of careful preparation, critical thinking and research. We propose an approach which we hope will better balance the competing interests. A question that many forensics educators and participants will ask, as they did about CEDA when it was founded, is whether parliamentary debate is "really debate." We believe that some current NPDA practices make the question a legitimate one. In our opinion, the failure of NPDA to define a set of information that a student should be prepared to debate results in many frivolous, nearly content-free exchanges that can barely be called debates.

A typical NPDA tournament offers six or eight preliminary rounds of debate with topics that vary from famous quotations to pithy maxims. The debaters are given ten to fifteen minutes to

prepare a case on the topic, if they are government, or to anticipate what the government might argue, if they are assigned to represent the opposition.

There appear to be only two requirements for a government case to be acceptable. First, the case must be linked to the topic. Second, the case must not require "specific knowledge," which is explained in the NPDA constitution to mean: "the case must be comprised of reasonably general knowledge that *most highly educated college students* [emphasis and italics added] should be aware of" (Appendix C, para IV-B, 1993).

In practice, a good case link is not necessarily one that inheres to the topic, but one that can be defended as being a "legitimate interpretation" of it. An informal survey we conducted at several debate tournaments offering parliamentary debate, revealed that for any topic offered in a particular round, no two teams ran the same case. We believe this variance to be a sign that under the current rules and practices of NPDA debate, there are few restrictions on how a topic may be interpreted. The result is that a government team can run almost any case they can think of, as long as they are capable of providing a defensible link to the resolution. In effect, there is no topic limiting the government. It doesn't take a great deal of intellectual prowess to link any case to the topic. The opposition team, on the other hand, is able to complain about the government link with no apparent standards for determining what is legitimate or fair.

A second issue is the determination of what amounts to

"reasonably general knowledge that most highly educated, college students should be aware of." Wouldn't a highly educated, college student know about comparative religion? Basic calculus? World history? Philosophy? Just about anything? We can identify no consensual standards for what constitutes a highly educated, college student. And by *whose standards* do we determine whether a violation has occurred? The government team has the most to gain by an expanded interpretation of what is specific knowledge. The opposition team has the most to gain by limiting the realm of knowledge in which they are expected to be facile. The judge might not even be a college student or might be a highly educated, Ph.D. level, college student or graduate, so it does not seem fair to leave the decision there. The irony is that what constitutes a "highly educated, college student" is so vague and broad that a debater attempting to become highly educated might be discouraged by the impossibility of the task.

Our experience has been that whenever an opposition team doesn't know something about a case put before them, they make the pleas of "no link" and/or "specific knowledge," hoping the judge will sympathize with their plight. And the opposition is not necessarily being unfair. The scope of what a good link is, or what should be known, is so vague and subjective that it is virtually impossible for a debater to anticipate what they should be prepared to know and know about. The debaters are given an incentive to pre-plan a few cases (since link requirements are minimal) for when they will be the government and to avoid any

preparation for the opposition since it is impossible to know what to prepare.

The concept of the "time/space" case also makes a mockery of the notion of advance preparation. The NPDA Constitution provides an explanation of the time/space case.

Both judges and teams assume the role of a figure in an alternate spatiotemporal setting. Consequently, all facts and judgments must be of this time period. Any information which would be unknown to people of this setting is unacceptable.

(Appendix B, para II-A3c, 1993)

How does a debater prepare for such a case? The argument can be made that the "specific knowledge" and "highly educated, college student" restrictions should prevent esoteric cases from being argued effectively. But if the scope of knowledge expected of debaters crosses all boundaries of time and space, where does the debater, who is not already a highly educated, college student, begin to prepare to become one? If all philosophical, historical, governmental, economic, and other study areas are fair game for a government case, AND there is no limitation on the temporal context of the discussion, then how many students will be encouraged to learn everything about everything in every time or place? Our experience is that without some limit on the amount of information students are expected to be familiar with, they will choose the option of "thinking on their feet" and hoping to be persuasive over taking on such a seemingly impossible research burden.

The result of the ambiguity of link requirements, combined with the vagaries of what amounts to specific knowledge and the possibility of time/space cases, has direct negative impacts on debates. Even when the government runs a straightforward example of the resolution, the lack of preparation and research on the part of the opposition, and acquiescence on the part of the judge that the opposition is at an extreme disadvantage, results in shallow, inconsequential, boring debates.

Of course, there will occasionally be good debates. The point is that current practices do not encourage them. Preparation for the government side often amounts to picking a few areas of interest for the government side, and preparing cases in advance knowing that link complaints are relatively easy to defend against. The opposition team, on the other hand, is saddled with the burden of having no way to anticipate what they are about to debate. And even if the opposition team is, or should be, aware of the information being presented, it is in their best interest to complain that the government has founded their case on specific knowledge, in the hope that the judge will agree. The goal being to win debates, neither side is encouraged to do a lot of work in anticipation of a tournament. This is not to say that some diligent debaters will not do the best they can to prepare, but the student who is inclined to take shortcuts is encouraged to do so, since it is possible to be successful by being glib\* when the community recognizes the impossibility of being prepared to debate everything.

We believe that making the research burden manageable and the knowledge expectations reasonable can provide the incentive to do research without compromising other goals of NPDA. The basic solution is a rather simple one. Topics should be written or interpreted to reflect concern for current events of national and international importance, and time/space cases should be prohibited. Specifically, policy and policy evaluation resolutions could be offered that reflect issues of current concern. For example, a topic such as: "Be it resolved that the United States should militarily intervene in Bosnia," or any similar timely topic stated as a policy or policy evaluation proposition, would be appropriate for the highly educated, college student.

Alternately, topics that come from quotation books or words of philosophers could be linked to cases on current events. Any pithy, witty, or reflective topic can be analyzed by applying them to current issues. Adopting this alternative approach requires no change in current topic selection. It simply restricts the types of cases that would be legitimate.

The topics should be broad enough to give the government team some leeway, yet narrow enough to allow the opposition to anticipate the possible cases. For example, the topic: "Be it resolved that this House supports the Clinton Healthcare Proposal" might be too specific. If the topic was "BIRT: the healthcare system in the United States should be significantly changed," then the government would have several options, including a philosophical discussion of whether or not the government should be

involved at all. The opposition would have some warning about what might be offered. Philosophical questions regarding topics of current concern could also be framed.

Offering more topics which refer to specific events and issues would reduce the effectiveness of pre-planned cases. The vague link requirements make it quite profitable for a debate team to prepare a couple of stock cases that they can easily link to almost any topic. Specific issue topics would force debaters to prepare for a much broader range of possible cases on both the government and opposition side. Limiting the possibilities to current events, however, would make that task manageable.

This proposal can be easily implemented. Article IX, Section 3a of the NPDA constitution can be amended to read:

Topics can be policy based similar to topics chosen for extemporaneous speaking or philosophical in nature, similar to topics chosen for impromptu speaking, but in any case should be interpreted to pertain to issues of current national and international concern.

The appendices would need to reflect the changes by suggesting that topics be written and/or interpreted to reflect events of current importance. The time/space case should be specifically prohibited.

The issue of what constitutes current events can be narrowed in much the same way as it is de facto resolved in extemporaneous speaking contests. That is, any topic that is being discussed by major newspapers and news magazines would be fair game. The scope of what constitutes current events is broad, but is a small subset

of the existing standard of the "highly educated, college student." Certainly any highly educated person should be prepared to talk intelligently about important issues in the context of current events. A student who is not already highly educated can make significant headway toward becoming such by keeping up with the issues of our times. The truly educated student will have the advantage of understanding and being able to articulate the historical, philosophical, moral, and other implications and ramifications of timely issues.

Eliminating the time/space case would have no significant impact on the flexibility of the government in choosing a case, but would make preparing for the opposition side manageable. Time/space cases can be fun, but we can think of no significant educational advantage to the time/space case that outweighs the preparation disincentive it creates. Historical perspectives are not lost by eliminating time/space cases. Those perspectives must simply be linked to current issues. Eliminating the time/space case would also be more consistent with international competitions, which specifically prohibit "squirreling" (including time/space cases).

We believe that adopting this proposal will limit the scope of preparation necessary to participate in parliamentary debate to a degree that will make preparation manageable, as well as productive, providing significant incentives for students to do research. We agree with Combs, who writes that: "students should be encouraged to write briefs or outlines of the ideas they are

collecting"(77), and limiting the scope of topics will make it realistic for debaters to prepare to engage in intelligent, informed discussions about the important issues of our times.

This approach will dovetail quite nicely with the international style of parliamentary debate, which tends to focus on current and substantive, international issues. Fayne reports that, "the best British debaters will tell stories of how they spent weeks researching the topic for their most prestigious competitions" (44). In fact, a possible addition to our proposal, which is consistent with the World Universities Debating Tournament procedures, would be for tournaments to announce a theme of some current issue to encourage debaters to prepare in advance for a given competition.

Humor, which is also encouraged by the NPDA constitution, should not be forfeited under our proposal. The current events standard would encourage debaters to use humor to make a point, rather than making humor the point itself.

Adopting this proposal will encourage a balance between preparation in research and delivery. Our extemporaneous speaking students know what the ground is. Why shouldn't our parliamentary debaters have the same parameters? Just as a good extemper will know the facts, as well as the historical and value background of current issues, the parliamentary debater will be encouraged to know that careful and thorough preparation of a definable set of information will net rewards. Hard work will pay off.

Works Cited

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