

“The Influence the Nature of the Resolution may have on Win/Loss Ratios in Parliamentary Debate”

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Introduction

"The resolutions at that tournament were 'whacked!'" Such exclamations are not unfamiliar to coaches and judges after a tournament, and while no one is likely to argue against the reasoning that some resolutions are easier and more enjoyable to see in a debate round, the popular myth on the subject of resolutions is that somehow or another, resolutions affect the outcome of debates. When a resolution is "bad" — the reasoning seems to go — then there is an excuse on the part of debaters and coaches alike for poor performance. Yet, there is little, if any, empirical evidence supporting the conclusion that resolutions have any impact on decision making by Parliamentary debate judges. Thus, in an effort to begin research regarding the issue, I address in this paper the nature of resolutions and their impact on win/loss ratios. After reviewing a limited amount of research relevant to the issue, I present quantitative analysis of parliamentary debate ballots in order to answer the following questions: 1) Do judges comments suggest that they are voting on issues related to the resolution? If so, what are those issues and are any of these issues resulting in a significant amount of wins/losses for a particular side? 2) Are judges comments related to resolutions mainly issues of link and thus arguably valid voting criteria? 3) Do resolution types — straight or abstract and fact, value, policy or ambiguous — significantly impact the ratio of wins/losses on a particular side?

Relevant Literature and Hypotheses

Given the youthful status of research in parliamentary debate not a lot of quantitative research has been done in parliamentary debate at all. Moreover, a review of forensics publications from 1988 to the present (*Argumentation and Advocacy*, the *Journal of the American Forensics Association*, the *National Forensics Journal*, *The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta*, *Proceedings of the Pi Kappa Delta Developmental Conferences*, *National Federation of High School Speech and Debate Association publications*, the *Parliamentary Debate* journal, and the *Southern Journal of Forensics*) shows no empirical studies on the impact of resolution on win/loss ratios in parliamentary debate. Nonetheless, a limited pool of research in other areas of forensics supports that forensics judging should be unbiased and educational and that topic may impact judging in other areas of competition helping to undergrid the need for a study of this nature.

First, the concern for fair and pedagogical judging in all events is a common issue in forensic research. Wright (1991) argues that there is a need for forensics judges to provide more educational comments on ballots. Norwig (1991) and others argue that debate judges need to be unbiased and help teach argumentation.

Second, forensics research suggests that students believe that topic issues factor into judging outcomes. Since by and large, if well "linked," the resolution given to debaters in a parliamentary debate round is the overarching topic of the debate it would seem that resolutions could factor into outcomes. Knapp and Galizio (1999) suggest that propositions and actual topics should be reasonable derivations of the resolution in a given debate round. Topics, it seems, should "mirror" the topic implied or stated in resolution. So do these then factor into judging? In a paper looking at topics used in persuasive speaking, Leiboff (1991) argues that although classical studies of topic choice would imply that any topics are acceptable for oration, in at least one round at a national tournament there were topic areas that were clearly preferred by competitors and one may assume that these same topic areas are preferred by the judges who supported those speeches on the way to nationals.

Moreover, studies of student perceptions of judge competence include how judges respond to topics. Hanson (1988) notes that one of the top ten characteristics of a bad judges — as perceived by students — is that the judge reacts to the topic/selection rather than the quality of performance. The apparent belief among students this that topic does matter to judges and the concept that it matters is an apparent violation of a student-held belief that topic shouldn't decide an individual events round. Thus, judge reaction to topic is a concern in other areas of forensics.

If parliamentary resolutions are to be unbiased toward one side or another, a fairness assumption held throughout the Parliamentary debate community, then student concern about if and how resolutions impact judge decisions is a legitimate question of inquiry. In order to contribute to the discussion of resolution and the impact of resolution on win/loss ratios, in this study I examine the following five hypotheses which extend from the perception that topic impacts judging decisions.

H1: Judges use resolution based criteria when voting.

H2: Judges using resolution based criteria impacts win/loss ratios.

If indeed judges are using resolution based criteria and if that impacts the outcome of rounds, then how the judge addresses the resolution as a voting criteria is legitimate. While students may suggest otherwise and

while it is commonly accepted in parliamentary debate (Knapp and Galizio, 1999) and other forms of debate that debaters should be able to self-determine what their cases are and how they should be run, no form of debate without its individual limitations as to what are legitimate approaches to topicality/resolutionality (e.g. Ulrich; 1990 Bartanen and Frank, 1991). There are legitimate judging perspectives in the parliamentary debate community which suggest that the government has a burden to offer logically derived and reasonable cases from resolutions. Williams and Worth (1996) and Johnson (1996) present an initial debate on time-space case shifts which raises the question of what are legitimate parameters in defining a case from a resolution and how much should a judge be expected to accept in terms of resolitional definition. Moreover, in a practical area, judges suggest that they have a right to expect topics to be inked to and logically derived from the resolution. A perusal of the judging philosophies book published by the NPDA for the 1999 National Tournament finds that any number of judges list reasonableness of interpretation and preferences for interpretation of the resolution as part of their philosophies in deciding rounds. This being the case, if the resolitional issues which appear to affect decision are primarily link and interpretation related criteria for decision, the use of resolution based criteria in voting would be reasonable. Thus this study considers:

H3: Judges use one type of resolitional related criteria for decision more often than others.

In addition to considering these hypotheses, I address whether the nature of the resolution impacts win/loss ratios. Knapp and Galizio (1999) note that resolutions can be either straight or abstract, and that resolutions can lead to cases which are fact, value, or policy. Frequent discussion emerges both at tournaments and on the NPDA listserv over whether a straight resolution is a boon or a bane in a Parliamentary debate round. The general consensus seems to be that abstract topics provide more room for definition and thus are an advantage, especially to novice, government teams. The pros or cons of this issue are well beyond the scope of this paper, but in the spirit of exploration, I conclude in this study the question of whether type of resolution, straight or abstract, and implied case directions, fact, value, policy or ambiguous, impacts the win/loss ratios for sides. Thus, the final hypotheses in this paper are:

H4: Type of resolution (straight of abstract) impacts round outcome.

H5: Nature of resolution (fact, value, policy, or ambiguous) impacts round outcome.

Method

Procedures

Parliamentary debate ballots were collected from all rounds at the 1999 Novice Nationals Parliamentary Debates, the 1999 Nebraska Double-Up Tournament at Creighton University, and the 1999 Concordia Classic at Concordia University. In addition, miscellaneous ballots were gathered from the 1998-99 season for the Point Loma Nazarene teams which travel the Westcoast extensively, and the Concordia University teams which travel the Midwestern and Western United States extensively. Duplicate ballots to those in the tournaments and provided by the teams were eliminated from the pool. In total there were 958 ballots. Permission was obtained from the tournament directors for use of the three tournament collections and the team collections were provided by coaches for the two teams.

Two undergraduate students familiar with parliamentary debate — one both as a judge and a competitor, the other as a competitor — were trained to code the ballots as having decision criteria related to resolution and to look at resolution type and implied case direction. A third coder went through the ballot noting where the two coders "agreed" and "disagreed". Coder reliability for this study was calculated by the number of agreements divided by the number of disagreements (Donzella, 1989). Frey, *et. al.*, (1991) maintain that when two or more blind coders record observations with 80% or more agreement, their coding is relatively free of bias and is deemed reliable. There was 92% agreement between the coders on their identification of which ballots had decision criteria related to resolution providing excellent intercoder reliability. All disagreements were then resolved through discussion. There was 89% agreement between the coders on their identification of the resolution as fact, value, policy or ambiguous and there was 91% intercoder reliability on whether the resolutions were straight or abstract providing excellent intercoder reliability for both. All disagreements were then resolved through discussion.

After completing the initial separation of ballot with criteria related to resolution from the overall, the coders were asked to code the ballots in terms of what category the criteria fell into. The coding schema was determined through brainstorming with five debaters with 4 years or more of debating experience. The categories were: resolution itself (e.g. comments against the resolution on its own merits — bias, et.al.), appropriate/inappropriate interpretation of the resolution by the team as deemed by the judge (e.g. comments suggesting that the interpretation did/did not mirror the intent or wording of the resolution), appropriate or inappropriate topic choice by a team (e.g. comments suggesting that the topic derived from the resolution was inappropriate for the audience or debate in general), and

definitions which judges found problematic. The coders met with me periodically to clarify their understanding of the coding categories. Again, coder reliability was determined using Donzella's method. The percentage of agreement in the coding was 90%, indicating excellent intercoder reliability. All disagreements were evaluated through discussion.

Data Analysis

After the ballot comments were coded in both categories, the coded information was entered as necessary in to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and appropriate statistical measures were used to find validity for the various hypotheses.

Hypothesis One

H1: judges use resolution based criteria when voting. A Chi-square analysis found a significantly ($p < .01$) lower use of resolutional criteria than may be expected for the sample. Judges preferred no resolutionally related comments ($n = 738$) over any other category of resolutionally related comment.

Hypothesis Two

H2: Judges using resolution based criteria impacts win/loss ratio. While this sample, like many before it in parliamentary, shows an Opposition bias (Opposition winning 57.1% and government winning 42.9% of the total ballots), there was no evidence to suggest a significant difference in the number of opposition wins due to resolutionally based criteria as a voting issue. The analysis of variance found an F ratio of 1.18 which was significant for the sample (See graph in Appendix A for breakdowns).

Hypothesis Three

H3: Judges use on type of resolution related criteria for decisions more often than others. A Chi-square analysis found a significant difference in type of resolutional voting criteria ($p < .01$). Among other categories used for decision, judges commented on resolution in the following order of preference: questioned the interpretation of the resolution ($n = 144$), disliked definitions ($n = 38$), disliked the topic derived from the resolution ($n = 28$), and voted against the content of the resolution itself (e.g. this resolution is sexist sand should not be supported by the Government) ($n = 6$).

Hypothesis Four

H4: Type of resolution (straight or abstract) impacts round outcome. This sampling showed that there are more abstract than narrow topics being offered, yet an analysis of variance showed no significant difference in win/loss ratios based upon type of resolution ($F = .162$) (See graphs in Appendix A for breakdowns).

Hypothesis Five

H5: Nature of resolution (fact, value, policy, or ambiguous) impacts round outcome. While in this sampling only overtly valued based topics had more Government wins (by a slight margin), analysis of variance showed no significant difference in win/loss ratios based upon the nature of the resolution ($F=.687$) (See graphs in Appendix A for breakdowns).

Conclusions

As one of my statistics teachers in my graduate program noted — sometimes finding nothing is a good thing. This study suggests that judges really are not focusing on the resolution when they are voting. When they do, they are looking at valid issues in parliamentary debate like resolutional analysis, definitions, and topic choices. These are all controllable and trainable issues for debaters. With skill and audience analysis, debaters can work with these issues. More than that, the resolutional issues are not creating bias for one side of the other when they are included.

In the area of resolutional type, whether broad or narrow for fact, value, policy, or ambiguous, there is not a significant bias for one side or another. Nonetheless, looking at the graphs of breakdowns we can see that while non-significant, some types of topics do have heavier opposition wins than others and it would behoove tournament directors to consider that when we talk about topic choices. Further, future research should look closely at the wording of resolutions to see if there are specific value implications or policy areas that lead to opposition wins. While beyond the scope of this study, there were specific topics in each tournament set which appeared to have larger margins of win/loss.

The bottom line, though is that type and nature of topic in general were not to blame for win/loss ratios of judging comments in this study and while we all may like some topics better than others, topic type and nature are not an obvious factor in decision making. That gives me a new mission with my students and students that I judge — to dispel the myth of "the resolutions are to blame."

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Appendix A

(Government is always listed first)

