

No-Topic Debating in Parliamentary Debate: Student and Critic Reactions

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Issues concerning the nature and meaning of the resolution constitute a starting point for discussion concerning academic debate. Throughout the textbooks for debate, discussions usually begin with what makes a good resolution as well as how the topic may be framed in one or more of the following fashions: fact, value, policy, and/or quasipolicy.¹ Parliamentary debate textbooks, parliamentary debate websites, and published journal articles contain sample resolutions for tournaments.² Renea Gernant and Kristy Waterman (23-30) have discussed how the resolution might affect the outcome of a parliamentary debate round. Indeed, nearly all of the discipline's collegiate debate literature and practice assumes a pre-assigned proposition to support or oppose.

Yet in daily life, participants in argumentation often choose not only how to discuss topics, but what topics to discuss. For example, Franz van Eemeren, Rob Grotendorst, and Francisca Snoeck Henkemans (5-6) discuss how topics for discussion emerge when we discover that our opinions differ with others during conversation. Furthermore, Mark R. Crossman (4-5) implies that the topics for argument we experience in our personal development may or may not be pre-planned. Participant topic choice abounds in public life as well. For example, political candidates often agree, with the moderators, on the topics before the debate. Entire issues can erupt simultaneously in any branch of government, both within either branch and within teams that coordinate action between branches.

Although many instances of opinion difference and argument take place without an outside-proscribed resolution, the proscribed topic model generally constitutes the model for intercollegiate academic debate laboratory in the United States. National committees determine the resolutions shared by both the American Forensic Association's National Debate Tournament (NDT) and the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA). Typically, individual tournament directors choose topics for both the NPDA and American Parliamentary Debate Association Tournament (APDA) within the bylaws of each organization. The National Forensic Association (NFA) sets a national topic for its sanctioned intercollegiate policy Lincoln-Douglas debates. Although a few students contribute feedback on topic selection procedures, and sometimes even write resolutions for parliamentary debate tournaments, the basic idea is that the student-participants in a particular round rarely write or

decide entirely what resolutions to discuss. Even where students do choose topics, that choice comes from a pre-determined list.³

Discussion of No-Topic Debating

The idea no-topic debate for competition is not new. Members of the CEDA and NDT community have considered the possibility of not proscribing a topic for the season, thereby leaving the choice not only of what claims to argue, but what overall topic(s) to discuss, up to the participants in a particular round. In a 1996 discussion over this possibility, the CEDA-L listserv, now known as eDebate, John Meany, denouncing the "myth of limits" in narrow resolutions, discussed no-topic possibilities for public debate formats such as parliamentary debate:

In addition to policy debate, I continue to coach students for national and international policy debate, an even which encourages preparation for extemporaneous debate on any topic. I also prepare students for public events and television/radio projections that are "open forums"-any issue can be discussed and debated. Scores of Claremont students participate in competitive and non-competitive "open debate and discussion" events each year. Hundreds of audience members and guests engage them in spontaneous argumentation.

Although a number of responses to this thread contested vehemently Meany's proposal, apparently the idea received consideration by the CEDA topic committee—not only for one tournament or round, but for an entire year. In responding to the proposal for a no-topic year, Alfred C. Snider said,

I am interested in considering such an [no topic] option. As a member or as chair of the topic committee I can introduce ideas, but I can't make them happen. However, I have raised this issue at every topic committee meeting I have been at. When Pam [Stepp] chaired the committee at the summer meeting in Wheaton she had it near the top of her agenda.

Although Meany later raised doubts that the no-topic idea really received any serious consideration and that some deemed it to be against the CEDA Constitution, that the issue of no-topic debating raised such a heated discussion at such high levels supports empirical testing of the idea.

This study does not argue with the body of literature concerning the value of debating pre-assigned resolutions. Rather, this study answers Snider's challenge: "Perhaps one of our organizations might want to experiment with no topic at all, or perhaps we could do it for one year, but

I am not sure I would want to have it at all." To test this, a tournament tested no-topic parliamentary debate for just one round.

This study examines student and critic reactions to participation in a no-topic parliamentary debate round at a Midwestern tournament where participants were from both APDA and NPDA. This reflected the type of experiment that Meany and Snider, along with other leaders in US academic debate, debated in the 1996 thread. The study thereby informs the discussion over costs and benefits of providing students an alternative

To advance dialog concerning whether students benefit from debate rounds without a preset resolution, the present study contains three parts: 1) methods of data collection, 2) results from the data, and 3) discussion and implications for both the development of argumentation theory and debate practice at the tournaments sponsored by NPDA and other intercollegiate debating organizations.

Method

The study involved forty-three students and nine critics who participated in a parliamentary debate tournament where no topic was assigned for the fourth round debates. True to the idea of openness, no rules regarding the topic were announced; no topic, or written instructions other than time limits and judging instruction, were provided. In this spirit, the participants first provided anecdotal reactions to the no-topic debate, so that the data from this study could emerge from discussion. Second, respondents provided demographic data so that patterns could be compared along three dimensions. These dimensions, the independent variables for the student portion of the study, involved three items: 1) level of debate experience; 2) whether NPDA was the only format of parliamentary debate the students had experienced; and 3) whether students had participated in NDT or CEDA policy debate. Third, the questions were to determine how students rated the debates based on criteria for good debate-educational value, clash, and a fair division of ground. Students were also asked two general questions: whether they would try the no-topic debate again, and whether they liked the no-topic round. These questions constituted the dependent variables for the student study.

Because the sample was small, descriptive statistical data were gathered from critics. Taking into account the experience of the critics, additional questions concerning items such as whether no-topic debating deepened discussion. Both students and critics were asked which side they thought the no-topic approach favored, and the students with NDT/ CEDA policy debating experience were asked if a no-topic debating season would be good for policy debate.

For the objective items, critics and students were asked to circle a number between 1 and 7 to indicate the strength of reaction to each item (Appendix I and Appendix II). In scoring responses, the most favorable rating received the highest score of seven and the least favorable rating a score of one. In some instances, values that were circled on the sheet were reversed such that the most favorable reaction to that category received the higher score. Frequency distributions and statistics were then tabulated for each question, and the anecdotal remarks were tabulated. For the student empirical data, t-tests were conducted to determine whether overall debate experience, NPDA experience, or policy experience affected how the students reacted to an item. As a test for significance, p was set to less than or equal to .05.

Results

Student responses to Specific Questions. The frequency of the student responses to questions, with descriptive statistics the results from each question, are indicated in the following five tables:

TABLE 1: The extent to which students believe that "no topic debate round was a challenging educational experience for me."

Response rating n=21	Expericd >15 rds. n=22	Inexp. <15 rds n=23	NPDA Only n=23	Other Parli n=20	NDT CEDA n=22	No NDT CEDA n=21	Total n=43
7	2	5	2	5	2	5	7
6	2	3	2	3	4	1	5
5	4	1	4	1	1	4	5
4	4	3	2	5	3	4	7
3	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
2	1	3	1	3	3	1	4
1	8	6	12	2	8	6	14
Mean	3.43	3.86	2.96	4.45	3.27	4.05	3.65
Median	4.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	2.50	4.00	4.00
Mode	3.33	1.00	1.00	7.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Std Dv.	2.27	2.43	2.31	2.11	2.27	2.36	2.32
Krtsis.	-1.53	-1.70	-1.44	-1.28	-1.49	-1.46	-1.54
Skwns.	0.12	0.09	0.55	0.22	0.41	-0.16	0.12
Cnf lvl.							
p<=.05	1.01	1.08	1.00	0.99	1.01	1.07	0.71

TABLE 2: The extent to which "the no-topic debate increased clash in the round."

Response rating n=21	Expericed >15rds. n=22	Inexp. <15rds n=23	NPDA . Only n=23	Other Parli n=20	NDT CEDA n=22	No NDT CEDA n=21	Total
7	3	4	4	3	3	4	7
6	1	5	2	4	4	2	6
5	2	1	0	3	1	2	3
4	3	3	2	4	4	2	6
3	2	1	2	1	2	1	3
2	2	3	2	3	1	4	5
1	8	5	11	2	7	6	13
Mean	3.19	4.09	3.00	4.35	3.68	3.57	3.63
Median	3.00	4.00	2.00	4.50	4.00	3.00	4.00
Mode	1.00	7.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
StdDv.	2.25	2.39	2.43	1.98	2.30	2.38	2.31
Krtsis.	-1.12	-1.68	-1.12	-1.08	-1.54	-1.57	-1.53
Skwns.	0.55	-0.09	0.77	-0.32	0.09	0.32	0.20
Cnf lvl.							
p<=.05	1.02	1.06	1.05	0.93	1.02	1.08	0.71

TABLE 3: The extent to which students "would like to try another no-topic round."

Response rating n=21	Experienced >15rds. n=22	Inexp. <15 rds n=23	NPDA . Only n=23	Other Parli n=20	NDT CEDA n=22	No NDT CEDA n=21	Total n=43
7	3	5	1	7	4	4	8
6	2	1	1	2	2	1	3
5	1	2	3	0	2	1	3
4	1	3	0	4	2	2	4
3	2	4	2	4	2	4	6
2	1	0	-	0	1	0	1
1	11	7	15	3	9	9	18
Mean	2.90	3.73	2.22	4.60	3.41	3.24	3.33
Median	1.00	3.50	1.00	4.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Mode	1.00	1.00	1.00	7.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Std Dv.	2.41	2.35	1.95	2.23	2.44	2.39	2.39
Krtsis.	-1.10	-1.43	0.41	-1.30	-1.56	-1.22	-1.40
Skwns.	0.79	0.19	1.35	-0.28	0.36	0.57	0.44
Cnf lvl.							
p<=05	1.10	1.04	0.84	1.05	1.08	1.09	0.73

TABLE 4: The extent to which students did not believe that "the no topic debate was very much skewed to one side."

Response rating n=20	Expericed >15 rds. n=22	Inexp. <15 rds n=22	NPDA . Only n=22	Other Parli n=20	NDT CEDA n=22	No NDT CEDA n=20	Total n=43
7	2	4	1	5	2	4	6
6	1	3	0	4	1	3	4
5	2	2	3	1	1	3	4
4	3	2	2	3	4	1	5
3	1	2	2	1	3	0	3
2	1	5	•	3	3	3	6
1	10	4	15	3	8	6	14
Mean	2.85	3.82	2.22	4.40	2.91	3.85	3.36
Median	1.50	3.50	1.00	4.50	2.50	4.50	3.00
Mode	1.00	2.00	1.00	7.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Std Dv.	2.21	2.26	1.95	2.28	2.00	2.47	2.26
Krtsis.	-0.92	-1.56	0.41	-1.51	-0.36	-1.82	-1.36
Skwns.	0.73	0.19	1.35	0.28	0.81	0.01	0.41
Cnf lvl.							
p<=.05	1.03	1.00	0.84	1.07	0.89	1.16	0.70

With regard to the 22 students who indicated some experience with NDT/CEDA policy debate, the following frequency resulted in responses concerning the extent to which students felt that no-topic debating would be a good experiment for the year of NDT/CEDA debating:

TABLE 5: The extent to which students "like no-topic debating."

Response rating n=20	Expericed > 15 rds. n=22	Inexp. < 15 rds n=22	NPDA . Only n=22	Other Parli n=20	NDT CEDA n=22	No NDT CEDA n=20	Total n=43
7	3	3	1	5	3	3	6
6	0	1	1	1	2	0	2
5	2	2	2	2	1	3	4
4	2	7	3	6	3	6	9
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	2	1	0	3	3	0	3
1	11	7	15	3	10	8	18
Mean	2.70	3.64	2.27	4.20	3.00	3.40	3.19
Median	1.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	2.00	4.00	3.00
Mode	1.00	1.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Std Dv.	2.32	2.19	2.00	2.17	2.35	2.23	2.28
Krtsis.	-0.59	-1.30	-0.07	-1.23	-.1.17	-1.25	-1.28
Skwns.	1.00	0.07	1.19	0.08	0.70	0.23	0.46
Cnf lvl.							
p<=.05	1.09	0.97	0.89	1.01	1.04	1.05	0.71

TABLE 6: Student perceptions that "the no-topic experiment would be a valuable experiment for year round policy debating." (n=22)

Response Rating	Frequency		
7	1	Mean	2.77
6	4	Median	1.00
5	1	Mode	1.00
4	2	Std. Deviation	2.24
3	1	Kurtosis	-1.23
2	1	Skewness	0.73
1	12	Conf. Level P<=.05	1.00

Finally, of the 43 responses, 35, or 81.4 per cent, felt that the no-topic debate skewed the outcome of the debate toward one side or the other. Of those responses, 32 (91.4 per cent of those indicating a bias, or 74.4 per cent of all respondents) indicated that the no-topic debate gave an advantage to the Government. Three (8.6 per cent of those indicating a bias, or 7.0 per cent of all respondents) indicated that the no-topic debate gave an advantage to the Opposition.

For the overall student data, each the mean of each item was slightly below 4.0, but mostly, the kurtosis figures were negative, and the standard deviations high, indicating a bipolar response to each question. The frequency tables bear out strong negative reactions, but a number of positive reactions which tended to be less strong. On the one hand, a substantial number of students and critics felt very strongly that the experience was negative, with the mode=1 for each item on the survey; however, on others, a substantial number of respondents rated aspects of the experience at 4 and above. The educational value had the highest central tendencies (mean=3.65, median=4.0, and mode=1.0), whereas the question over whether the students liked the experience was the lowest (mean=3.19, median=3.0, mode=1.0). Although there was a weak positive pole to the responses, those who had NDT/CEDA experience strongly opposed the idea of a no-topic year of debating in those organizations (mean=2.77, median =1.00, mode=1.00).

When the responses were compared based on degree of parliamentary debate experience, whether or not the student's background was solely in NPDA parliamentary debate, or whether or not the student has policy (NDT or CEDA) debate background, the data revealed three patterns: 1) For every question, the mean ratings by those with experience

were lower than those without experience, but that difference was not significant at the $p \leq .05$ level. 2) For every question, the mean ratings by those who had parliamentary debating experience only in NPDA were lower than those with NPDA experience only. In each case, these findings were significant at the $p \leq .05$ level. NPDA-only debaters differed most from those with other experience most in responding to the question of whether they would try the experiment again. For this question, the mean response was 4.6 for those with other experience, and 2.22 for those only with NPDA experience, with $t = -3.69$ ($p = .00034$). NPDA-only debaters differed least from others on the question of whether the debate promoted more clash. Here, the mean response was 3.0 for those with NPDA experience only, and 4.35 for the other group, with $t = -2.01$, ($p = .03$). For each question, those with other experience rated the experience above the expected value of 4, and those with NPDA only experience rated the experience at 3.0 or lower as a mean. Finally, 3), whether or not a student had participated in NDT or CEDA debate in each case made no statistically significant difference in how favorably a student rated any of the items. All of the means were below 4.0 for each group for each question.

Student Anecdotal Remarks.

Reflecting their numerical responses to the specific survey items, students wrote 31 statements opposed to the non topic idea, 10 comments indicated the idea might work with an improvement in procedures, and 13 in favor of the experience. Fifteen of the 43 respondents declined to offer any anecdotal remarks. The most common types of remarks included:

TABLE 7: Frequency Table for Student Anecdotal Responses

Comment	Frequency
Generally bad idea	10
Generally good idea	7
Confusion over rules and procedures	7
Worse than CEDA or policy debate	6
Promotes "Canned" Cases	4
Promotes Freer Expression	3
Gives Government an unfair advantage	3

Students reacting negatively tended to write more comments per student than those who ratings were more positive, however.

In any event, an examination of these type comments indicates a

strong bipolar reaction to the no topic round, skewed slightly toward those opposing the idea. Some remarks strongly attacked the experiment: "perhaps the most ridiculous notion for debate ever," "two thumbs down," "who needs that nonsense?," "worst parli experiment ever," "this is the most ridiculous round I have ever participated in", "this was a stupid waist [sic] of time," and "the single least educational or entertaining debate experiment in my life" were among such reactions. Others took the opportunity to attack other debate organizations: "I feel that that this form of debate could be abused even worse than CEDA ever thought about being!!!!," "This must be some idea of a silly APDA geek. . .if I wanted to run pre-conceived cases (b/c this one was all policy, like most), I'd be wearing "Birks" and beads in CEDA," "Might as well be CEDA," "The bridge you attempt to build between APDA and NPDA is unbelievably silly. It will never work," and "policy should be kept in CEDA" exemplified such remarks. Some students reporting that they had debated many parliamentary rounds, all NPDA, wrote some of the strongest negative remarks and even suggested more restrictions on resolutions. The following exemplified this reaction: "For us old-timers, we are deeply offended and I am hopeful that this will not happen in the future. Maybe resorting to more specific resolutions rather than creating easy ways out of setting up good round would be a much better solution."

However, some of the negative remarks suggested that changing the procedure for future experiments of this type might be helpful. "We need more structure" exemplified such remarks. Another respondent elaborated on such remarks, stating, "There seemed to be some confusion with all parties on the rules and procedures (it's understandable since this is new). In the future it should be clearer on what the rules are." Some of the comments noted that it was vague whether the teams should decide on what to discuss together, as happened in some of the rounds, or whether Government should decide, as occurred in others.

Although those favoring the idea spoke in fewer numbers, there was some favorable reaction to the no topic debate round. Some of the students enjoyed the round. "It was fun and enjoyable," said one respondent, and another added, "This allowed for this to be the most fun I've probably had yet." Others saw an ethical benefit to no-topic debating, stating "it was better to choose a topic we believed." Another added, "Non-topic debates allowed us to be creative without having to be dragged down by link debate which tends to be anti-constructive." Some who commented positively about the experiment were rather adamant in their opinions: "I love that you are stimulating my mind and letting my thoughts go where I want them to go. Y'all rock!! Thank you," and "I was very much in favor no topic debate because the topic [which emerged from prime minister constructive] was better," exemplify such thoughts.

Critic Responses to Specific Questions.

The reaction of the critics closely mirrored student reactions both on the specific survey questions and in the anecdotal reactions. Although there were not enough responses to divide the critics into categories, it is important to note that the critics who did respond generally constitute an expert pool in the judging of parliamentary debate in this mixed NPDA/APDA division. The frequencies of critic responses are reflected the following table.

TABLE 8: Critic Responses to Specific Questions (n=9)

	Mn.	Me- dian	Mde	S.D.	Kur- tosis	Skw ness	Cnf. Lvl.
Q1: Valuable experience	3.67	3.00	3.00	1.66	1.73	0.68	1.27
Q2: Attract Back	3.56	4.00	1.00	1.94	-1.44	-.107	1.49
Q3: Increases Clash	3.44	3.00	3.00	1.51	0.02	.136	1.16
Q4: Promotes Deep Discuss	3.44	4.00	4.00	1.88	-1.09	.038	1.44
Q5: Good for CEDA/NDT	3.67	4.00	1.00	2.40	-1.31	22.5	1.84
Q6: Non-Skewed	3.89	4.00	6.00	1.90	-1.39	-.219	1.46
Q8: Like No-Topic	3.89	4.00	5.00	2.03	-1.21	.077	1.56

On Question 7, four of the respondents indicated that no-topic debating favored the Government, one indicated that it favored the Opposition, and four offered no response to this particular item. Although the sample size is insufficient to compare with student responses, it would appear that critics were more open to the idea of the non-topic experience than were the students, and with the exception of item 3 (clash), the kurtosis values indicate a wide variety of answers for each question.

Critics' Anecdotal Remarks.

The critics' anecdotal remarks mirrored those of the students. Five of the surveys contained anecdotal responses while four were returned blank. These eighteen statements ranged from 1) unconditionally unfavorable [8], to 2) the notion that some no topic rounds have potential if specific procedures were explained more clearly [8], to 3) favorable [2]. First, a few critics noted that the exercise was "a waste of time." One even went so far as to state that "this is an incentive not to return!!" to the tournament. Having noted that the ability to discuss a wide variety of resolutions constitutes that which "separates good debaters from mediocre ones," the critic continued, "Anyone can advocate their favorite topic. It is an exercise in education, intelligence and skill that will educate students. Of all the bad ideas I've heard for

parliamentary debate, this is by far and away the worst. The tournament director should take some responsibility and write good resolutions."

Among those of the second category who rated the notion of offering no topic more moderately, either critics did not respond to the open-ended question, or indicated needs for improvement. Three types comments summarized those who suggested improvements in future no topics experience: a) that ethical considerations be addressed [for example, one respondent who believed that no-topic debate skews the results in favor of the Government said, "You must let everyone have an aff {ie, no topic in 2 rounds} or there will be imbalance in results" another said "Must have ethical pledge of no advanced prep by gov- if this ethical stance is adapted {offering no topic debate rounds} can be rewarding."]; b) that the no-topic approach could work better if modified [for example, a respondent said, "Better if a 'domain' were defined, such as foreign policy."] or c) that certain procedures be better explained than in this instance [several noted that both sides should be allowed to agree to a topic rather than Government choosing; one particular critic stated, "better if Government reveals case area before 15 minute prep {not details}."].

In terms of the third category, a few critics applauded the effort at the round, with one respondent claiming to "enjoy it immensely," applauding the creative effort put forth by the students. Overall, the critic responses to specific questions, though bipolar, seemed milder and less negative than those of the students; however, the critic responses to the anecdotal questions revealed stronger negative reaction than did student responses.

Discussion

The results of the instrument may be used to support a wide range of tournament administrator approaches toward non-topic parliamentary debate rounds. The choices boil down to three options. Depending on how the above data are interpreted, administrators may 1) avoid all no-topic debate rounds; 2) try no-topic debate rounds again, but with provisions for procedural instructions and a rationale for having such rounds provided in advance; or 3) offer a round based on the exact model of the round used for this study. The following discussion outlines the options based on the data of this particular study.

Option I: Avoiding all no topic debate rounds.

The option of avoiding no topic debates most applies to tournament directors whose programs rely on gross revenue from their hosted tournaments when the prospective entry would be predominately or all exclusively NPDA debaters , and to some the data may preclude trying

no topic rounds at all.

First, the idea proved more unpopular than popular among the student sample. For each of the questions, the mean of the overall sample was less than the expected score of 4.0, and the mode score (the value appearing most often) for the overall student response was 1.0 for every category. Although the standard deviation (from the mean), skewness (difference from a normal distribution) and kurtosis (height of the curve) statistics indicated a wide variety of different answers, a substantial proportion of the sample reacted vehemently against the no topic idea.

Second, critics did not seem particularly fond of the idea. They, too, offered a mean score of less than four on all of the questions they were asked. Although the medians and mode answers mostly indicated a softer reaction to the experiment among the critics against the idea, there were some who went so far to say that they would not attend another tournament with a no-topic round.

Although the results from this study came from one event at a particular time, they indicate some possibility of a backlash should this experiment be tried again. The risk of alienation, however, appears to be much less in terms of hosting tournaments where the bulk of the attendees would be APDA participants. Also, for tournament administrators who feel that they can afford to continue an educational dialog on the benefits of offering debate rounds with no proscribed topic, two other options exist based on this study. If a tournament director considers either of these options, the director should consult both the current bylaws of APDA and NPDA. As of this writing, the APDA bylaws regarding resolutions leave the decision of how to manage topics up to individual tournament directors. Perhaps explaining why the strongest negative reactions came from NPDA debaters, the NPDA may require permission to offer no-topic rounds before NPDA will sanction the tournament. At a minimum, the plans for any no-topic round should be explained clearly—and prominently—in the invitation under Options II and III below. To be safe, considering the current bylaws of NPDA, directors should notify NPDA of plans to conduct any no-topic rounds with the request for sanctioning.

Option II: Offering no-topic round(s) with the procedural adjustments and clarifications suggested by respondents.

Although the negative responses tended to be stronger than the positive responses, perhaps the most support the data offer would be to try no-topic debating again, but taking some or all the following steps not taken in this particular study:

1. Offer two rounds of no-topic debating where debaters with the

first such round being an odd-numbered round, so that students could debate once on each side. The numerical and anecdotal results of the surveys overwhelmingly suggested that no-topic contestants change and as the parliamentary debate format evolves, having two switch-side rounds would constitute the surest way to avoid perceptions the experiment favors one half of the division over the other. Two round would counterbalance any perceived inequity.

2. *In lieu* of attaching a topic to the ballot, attach a set of instructions to be read by the critic to the students specifying the following:

- a. There is no assigned topic for the round.
- b. Government will author as well as define the resolution(s), but may be held accountable to bring up debatable positions and arguments just as in other rounds.
- c. Each side will have fifteen minutes to prepare as soon as the critic finishes with these instructions.
- d. The time format for speeches and protected time are the same as for other parliamentary debate rounds.
- e. The round itself will be conducted as with other parliamentary debate rounds.
- f. The Opposition may prepare a counter case on a topic of its own choosing (as in other rounds) to run in case it can prove that the Government has failed to offer a resolution and/or arguments with fair ground.
- g. (for odd numbered rounds) You will have a chance to debate the other side in the no topic format next round.
- h. "Canned" approaches will be adjudged the same as for other rounds.

In general, the above instructions address the many objections, found in the anecdotal remarks of students and coaches alike, that expressed frustration at not knowing the procedure to follow. Also, these instructions clarify issues so that each round is conducted similarly. As well, these rules can be modified, such as to address concerns such as the Meany's notion that topics actually constrain Government ground more than Opposition. The strategy of formulating any rules would be to address issues of clarification and notification, while at the same time minimizing what Meany would term "codified limits" to the discussion.

Specifically, instructions a, c, d, and e address concerns over the specific rules for the round, and clarify how the round may proceed. Instructions b, f, and h address issues expressed both in the anecdotal remarks and in the numerical responses concerning in-round bias. Instruction g explains, in case students remain frustrated at what

Opposition can do, that there will be a chance to debate the other side to address any remaining discrepancy. Addressing these concerns could increase the overall evaluations of the no-topic experience by at least letting students and critics know how to conduct the round. At the same time, those attempting this must wrestle with a paradox, since, after all, these guidelines constitute imposed limitations and restrictions. Still, a modified approach to the no topic round—tried once and perhaps replicated identically over a number of years—might provide the field some idea of the trends surrounding the dialog over no-resolution debate.

3. In the invitation, offer a rationale for offering two no-topic rounds, and incorporate some of the positive remarks made about the experiment. These benefits include empowering students, teaching and trusting students to formulate good topics for discussion, encouraging thoughts to "flow freely", and to promote creativity on both sides. Explain, in the invitation, how clash can occur either at the topic formulation/fair grounds level, or at the designative level, in this format, and how it frees up Opposition as well as Government. If the two rounds are part of an experiment, explain that critics and students will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire after the round. Aside from this in-invitation paragraph, include the sheet that will be attached to ballots and read by the critics before each no topic round.

Addressing these concerns in the invitation reinforces how the rounds will be conducted. Also, it allows students and judges not only to make a more educated decision on whether to attend the tournament, but to practice some no topic rounds should they decide to attend. Finally, should data be collected at the end of the rounds, students and critics alike would have had more time to think out their anecdotal remarks concerning the experience.

4. Conduct a focus group discussion before developing any instrument to see if an instrument can be developed useful across tournaments to help measure changing perceptions of the no topic practice over time, or between certain regions or tournament types.

Overall, these modifications are designed to address some of the concerns expressed on the instrument for this study. They may not address all concerns, however, and there may be a few teams who choose not to attend, particularly if the invitation and publicity does not make clear that the no-topic round(s) were cleared with NPDA before sanctioning was received. However, the notion that most critics reacted less vehemently, coupled with specific procedural suggestions to reduce frustration, offer some support for further experimentation with the above restrictions. Also, a modified experiment as described in Option II could help measure whether the suggestions for improvement actually work, as

well as open up the possibility for asking questions not addressed by the present instrument. The basic idea could enable us to test reactions of those who have been instructed how the no topic rounds were offered by design. Option II could thereby reduce the perception, implied by some responses and expressed in the hallways after the round, that the no topic round was merely the product of a tournament director too lazy and/or irresponsible to come up with a "specific" resolution.

Option III: Replicating the experiment as done in this study.

On the surface, the current data offer little or any support for replicating the no-topic round either from a publicity standpoint or from the standpoint of perceived educational benefit. However, questions that remain unanswered by this study may suggest doing exactly that in case a tournament administrator perceives that the risk of a negative reaction justifies gaining what the data would reveal. First, logic behind no topic rounds is to get away from the what some could argue constitute the "codified limits" in Option II. For example, proponents of the no topic notion may argue that it is good to empower the students even to determine procedures. Such procedure would include 1) whether to develop one topic or several topics; 2) whether Government and Opposition would collaborate on and agree to a topic as soon as prep time begins; 3) whether to reveal to the Opposition the Government case concept before prep time begins in the case of no collaboration; and 4) whether or not to even try to come to a consensus on how procedural rules would be handled. The participants in each round could also determine how to approach the critic on these issues if free from such rules. Second, if both procedure and instrument remain identical, data could be compared more directly to the present study to determine whether time or locations, in addition to the other variables in the study, have changed thinking concerning some no topic rounds.

Reduced to absurdity, the notion of no rules for a debate tournament would result in chaos, bringing up an infinite regress into whether or not chaos is a good thing! At least on the surface, the results of this particular study would seem to discourage repeating this experiment as conducted for the present study. A number of participants may not want to return to the tournament because of the confusion and perceived lack of educational value. However, an exact representation and t-tests between results could help not only assess the validity and reliability of the instrument, but whether attitudes and perceptions have changed toward no-topic debating. Therefore, whereas Option III may seem to be out of the questions, benefits can still be gained from it in terms of studying the evolution of parliamentary debate format.

Limitations and Conclusion

Overall, this study contains three parts: (1) an assessment procedure for the perceived value of a no-topic parliamentary debate round at a Midwestern tournament; (2) questionnaire data and anecdotal responses from students and critics to the experience of participating in a debating round with no pre-assigned topic; (3) results of the study, noting how the results would apply to any of three choices a tournament administrator might make concerning the study and practice of not assigning students a resolution in parliamentary debate.

Admittedly, the data apply to one tournament from one place and time and may be very limited in scope. Many unanswered questions could provide fertile grounds for future study. For example, among others: How do students and critics think the experience of no-topic debating relate to debates in the "real world" such as political debates with no pre-announced topics? Does the approach encourage alternative performative, interpretive, evidentiary, or narrative means of proving points? What constitutes an ethical issue in no-topic debating? Does/should Government assume a heavier burden to produce a "fair" ground in no-topic debating? Just how far should rules be abandoned? Can an academic debate exist with a series of mini-debates on totally different resolutions, and how are such debates adjudged? If the suggestions offered in our second option are adopted, did they help make a difference in perceptions? Especially with the emergence of the "crossfire" format in high school debating, how does high school experience come into play? Perhaps the two most important related unanswered questions remain, "how do no resolution rounds influence the win-loss ratios in parliamentary debate?" (Gernant and Waterman 23-30) and "what are the optimal strategies of Government and the Opposition when no topic is assigned for the round?"

Regardless of how scholars perceive the outcomes of this study, the instrument's results should be viewed as part of a continuing dialog over whether from time to time, debate students should be allowed to choose the resolution to debate for a particular round as well as the individual arguments. As Paulo Friere would remind us, "Only dialog, which requires critical thinking, is capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialog there is no communication, and without communication there can be no education." (81) Leaders of all debate organizations, as well as tournament directors, are heartily encouraged to continue this dialog with participants. To the extent that resolutions both entitle and help to structure the discussion, such dialog looms particularly large.

Notes

¹ Among other contemporary debate textbooks discussing both the importance of resolutions and their typology, see Crossman 81-130; Freeley and Steinberg 35-49; Meany and Shuster 29-50; Trapp; and Ziegelmueller, Harris and Bloomingdale 30-47. For a discussion of the importance of propositions when persons express positive and negative opinions on a topic over conversation, see van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans 5-6. For NPDA guidelines regarding propositions, see Trapp, NPDA Webpage; for APDA rules, see the APDA Webpage.

² For examples of parliamentary debate resolutions, see Crossman 179-180; Jewell and Ford 24-34; Knapp and Galizio 187-188; and Meany and Shuster 301-328; For a history of the national CEDA and NDT resolutions, see Freeley and Steinberg 422-430.

³ For example, more parliamentary debate tournaments now give Government two choices of topics to run each round. Also, the Intercollegiate Public Debate Association (IPDA) hands both participants in its Lincoln-Douglas format five topics, followed by the participants taking turns in eliminating resolutions until one remains. Even in the IPDA, which styles itself after the Amateur Athletic Union by allowing non-students and amateur clubs to compete, these resolutions are prewritten by those other than those in the particular round. Furthermore, both NEDA and "Great Plains" debate also proscribe topics for their participants.

⁴ Meany, on June 23, 1996, proposed no topic debating as one of five options for the 1996-1997 school year when he proposed, among other suggestions, the following five options for CEDA Resolutions:

"1) Resolved: That the United States federal government should implement one or more initiatives to reduce substantially and industrial time-space compression.

2) Resolved: That the United States federal government should implement one or more initiatives to reduce substantially chemical pollutants.

3) Resolved: That the United States federal government should establish and/or increase one or more systems to reduce substantially chemical pollutants.

4) Resolved: That the United States federal government should adopt one or more significant industrial, land-use and/or urban policies to reduce substantially environmental pollutants."

5) Commenting on the options, Meany said, "Policy topic (5) is

accurately represented." This blank, no-topic option sparked a heated debate. For Meany's proposals, see <http://list.uvm.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9606&L=e Debate&O=A&F=P&P=28287>.

⁵Meany, <http://list.uvm.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9606&L=e Debate&P=R198931>.

⁶ Alfred C. Snider, <http://list.uvm.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9606&L=e Debate&D=0&P=220961>.

⁷ Meany, <http://list.uvm.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9606&L=e Debate&P=R235062>.

⁸ For discussions of the benefits of educational debating assuming the pre-assigned topic model, see, among others Freeley and Steinberg 22-30, and Norton 24-40).

⁹ The format we chose—no codified limits at all—were designed to facilitate some of the goals Meany suggested for no-topic debating. First, he suggests that the approach could promote new research skills that avoid "rote repetition" (perhaps including such broad research skills which Knapp and Galizio, as well as Meany and Shuster, later posit are necessary for effective parliamentary debating today). Second, Meany argues that beginning debaters would not suffer from the idea (because they would generally be debating against other beginning debaters either in novice divisions or in power matched rounds)—rather, beginners would actually benefit from the choosing resolutions they know about in order to learn debate theory quicker. Third, and mainly, Meany argues that the no-topic format would free students to let their thoughts flow more freely in the absence of "codified limits." He also posited a view that topics limit the Affirmative (Government) team choices without correspondingly limiting the negative (Opposition). For Meany's discussion of codified limits, see, among others, <http://list.uvm.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9606&L=e Debate&O=A&F=P&P=18764>.

¹⁰ Much literature agrees that educational value, clash, and fair distribution of ground constitute three major dimensions of the benefits for debating. Among sources claiming that the educational dimension of debate is important, see Freeley and Steinberg 22-30; Hill 47-70; Knapp and Galizio 5; and Snider and Schnurer (to the extent that Snider and Schnurer devote an entire book to the importance of debate across the curriculum. Among sources reflecting that clash is essential to good debate, see Crossman 47, Knapp and Galizio 59; and Meany and Shuster 19-21. Among sources reflecting the importance of a fair division of ground implying, that the discussion not be skewed toward one side or another, see Crossman 54, 85; Freeley and Steinberg 37-38, and Ziegelmueller, Harris and Bloomingdale 32.

¹¹ According to the APDA guidelines in Article V Section 5.08 of the organizations bylaws regarding "Tournaments," "APDA shall, by majority vote of the members, from time to time sanction debating tournaments hosted by its members. Each sanctioned tournament shall make known to competitors its tabulation procedures, judging procedures and debating format, and, if providing accommodations to competitors, pledge to provide safe accommodations. Except as otherwise provided by the Certificate of Incorporation or these Bylaws, the Corporation shall not direct how a member shall tabulate a tournament, how many rounds of debate a tournament shall have, the content of debate topics or resolutions that a tournament shall have, or any other specifics as to how a member shall run a tournament." [emphasis mine] The NPDA guidelines on resolutions may be interpreted to mean that a tournament director should both indicate the intention to offer the round(s), and seek permission to have the round(s) when seeking NPDA sanctioning. According to Bylaw XII, Section 1. on "Resolutions," the NPDA bylaws state, "1A. A different resolution for each round will be presented to the debaters at a specified time prior to the beginning of each debate." The bylaws continue in 1B to state, "the topic of each round will be about current affairs or philosophy. The resolutions will be general enough that a well-educated college student can debate them They may be phrased in literal or metaphorical language." Clearly, permission would be required under our option of offering two rounds; the language on topic wording does not specify who writes the topics, but nonetheless, it is advised that a director attempting even one round get permission to do so if that tournament expects to keep its NPDA sanctioning. The permission request should also indicate (as well as in all tournament information) whether students must adhere to the rule of debating a different topic each preliminary round instead of Government repeating a case from a previous round (covered in the point that discourages canned speeches under Option II). For the APDA resolution guidelines, see <http://apdaweb.org/bylaws.html#bylaws>. For the NPDA resolution guidelines, see <http://www.parldebate.org/bylaws-0402.pdf> 23-24. Also, see <http://www.parldebate.org/sanction.html>, which includes the sanctioning guideline that "The tournament agrees to follow the 'NPDA Guidelines for Debating and Judging,' as outlined in Bylaw XII." and that "deviations are clearly noted in the tournament invitation."

¹² Perhaps Meany's notion that topics restrict Affirmatives more than Negatives in CEDA/NDT debate applies even more to parliamentary debate because of the number of times Opposition wins by playing the tautology or truism cards. These, in addition to the myriad of tools transferable from the NDT/CEDA bag of tricks such as kritiks and in some instances, counterplans and a host of generic arguments Meany mentioned throughout his 1996 thread.

¹³ The extent to which the tournament directors wish to clarify Opposition options in light of no topic would be up to the directors, who, again, must consider for themselves how to resolve on key issue. That is how to resolve the paradox posed between allowing students thoughts to run freely and proscribing suggestions that might be taken as "codified limits". Clearly, even if Government announces the resolution(s) to debate in the PMC, Opposition has many options extant in the literature today to check for Government abuse. Such strategies include being well read in general and ready for any topic (Epstein 5-8); being prepared to explain and offer a "motion of dismissal" (Johnson 2-13); or being able to utilize the prep time to prepare a "Counter case" (Stapleton and Paroske 36-46). These ideas, in addition to using standard truism arguments (still popular with some of the critics), tautologies, kritiks, and even counterproposals to Governments who choose to run policy cases, are among many ways the Opposition can even the odds in the no-topic debate. Of course, the extent to which the director wishes to provide this "workshop" would raise issues not only in terms of the above paradox, but might create a perception that the written tournament material reinforces the Opposition advantage often cited for rounds that do have proscribed resolutions or resolution options. It is up to the enterprising director to decide how far to go with these guidelines. The basic idea here is that the no-topic idea should not preclude Opposition from winning rounds, even though Meany first offered the alternative for CEDA/NDT to help counteract a similar perceived advantage to the Negative (or Opposition) in assigned resolution rounds.

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APPENDIX I

Student Survey-No Topic Debate

1. Approximately how many rounds of experience do you have in parliamentary debate?
2. Does your school primarily attend NPDA or APDA tournaments, or both?
3. Does your school also do other forms of debate and/or individual events? If so, then what?

Please respond to the remaining statements on the basis of 1, strongly agree, to 7, strongly disagree. Circle the appropriate response.

1. The no-topic debate round was a challenging educational experience for me.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

2. The no-topic debate increased clash in the round

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. I would like to try another no-topic round

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. If you have been involved in team (NDT/CEDA) policy debate, answer this question: The no-topic experiment would be a valuable experiment for yearlong debate.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. The no-topic debate was very much skewed toward one side.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. If you feel the debate was skewed to one side, which side did the non-topic round favor?

Gov Opp

7. I like no-topic debating.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

In the remaining space, please make any other comments about your no-topic experience. Use the back of this form if needed.