

DEBATE THEORY OSSIFICATION

by Philip G. Kerpen

Introduction

Debate theory grows out of practice. Because of its pragmatic roots, it is typically supremely rational. Through time, however, justification for theoretical constructs are lost, and soundly justified procedures become ossified into anti-educational semi-rules, or even immutable rules in the eyes of some people.

This is what has happened to most of the stock issues. The stock issues were designed for a judicial model of debate. While such a model certainly has its merits (Ulrich comes to mind), it is not descriptive of debate as currently practiced. In a judicial model, it makes sense for there to be clearly established burdens that the affirmative must overcome with a high degree of certainty. When debate shifts to a Congressional/legislative model, however, those burdens become far less certain. A requirement of unqualified solvency, for example, just doesn't make any sense for a policy maker. If students are learning how to determine whether a policy should be adopted, then they should learn that a policy with a certain chance of solving should be adopted if it would have no adverse effects.

In the face of policy making, most regions of the country have yielded and given up stock issues as absolutes, with the possible exception of topicality. In some areas, however, the shift in practice has not been accommodated by theory, but rather outdated theory has been codified and has ossified to approach the rule status. This is the worse possible contingency, since it forces arbitrary burdens and irrational argumentation; debaters don't have any *impact* to why inherency is important, and yet they commit a large amount of time to it, because it is given arbitrarily inflated status by the system of rules. This not only diverts time from policy arguments with clear implication, but it also fails to teach the real reasons that stock issues may be important.

Reviving Stock Issues by Repealing Their Special Status

There are, in fact, some good arguments in favor of stock issues-type argumentation in some contexts. The critical move, however, to restoring their pedagogical and competitive value is to remove any mystique that they have as a result of being

privileged by authority. Stripped of the status of rules, most of the stock issues can make a lot of sense when justified in terms of the ballot by the debaters in the round. For my purposes, I'll discuss the stock issues in three sections -- inherency, solvency and harms, and topicality.

Inherency

Inherency is the abomination of debate theory. The amount of theoretical work devoted to this one concept swamps all others, and yet its basis--that the problem must be both endemic and identifiable with a particular cause, is wholly unwarranted. Argumentation theory in general, and specifically argumentation in policy making contexts, long ago came to the conclusion that it is entirely possible to solve a problem without fully identifying the cause; do you refuse medication from a doctor who is treating symptoms when the infectious agent is unknown? That would be irrational decision making, and teaching it would be unsound pedagogy.

But affirmatives have taken terribly unfair advantage of the death of inherency. Inherency is important as a divider of ground; as a way to prevent the aff from being so close to status quo that there is not adequate disad ground. The issue is not so much resolutorial justification, as it is simple fairness. If affirmatives are permitted to simply extend policies that already exist, or to change funding levels slightly, then they fail to provide the negative with any unique disad ground. Some say that this only makes the case strategic, but that's a silly argument. It is *always* strategic to attempt to abuse the other team; that's why we need to place theoretical constraints on debate in order to create some parity of ground.

Inherency as a quest to require the affirmative to prove barriers and jump through other hoops to prove causality is an absurdity. It shifts the focus of the debate away from the plan, and the resolution, and to debates about mechanisms and intricacies that are irrelevant to the extent that the problem is shown to exist and the plan is shown to solve it. As a pure procedural, however, with a ground impact, inherency can be a critical tool against cases that attempt to avoid all unique disad ground.

Solvency and Harms

Arbitrary standards that solvency must be absolute and harms must be significant are another hallmark of ossified stock issues debate. When cost benefit analysis is applied, these concepts fall apart, and this is largely what has happened with comparative advantage cases. While it has been effectively argued that comparative advantage cases are substantively no different from traditional need cases (notably Zarefsky), they did shift the way we look at the issues. It is difficult to argue with the seemingly correct analysis that any risk of an advantage justifies action when there is no disadvantage. Thus the "any risk aff" theory was born.

Upon further investigation, the "any risk" theory is terrible. It presupposes that there is no value to the resources that exist in the legislative and administrative process, and as a result it reaches flawed conclusions; there is a tradeoff cost in the enactment of *any* policy. A stronger presumption may be the most important way to end the aff skew that plagues most debate areas under modern theory. The challenge is to weigh tradeoff costs in some nonarbitrary way. The best is probably through spending tradeoff disadvantages, when a specific scenario can be outlined. Other times it is more difficult. We need to develop a mechanism for determining the value inherent in legislative and administrative resources as a decidedly nonzero automatic weight to place against affirmative advantages. This is an area that needs to be investigated further.

Topicality

Topicality has survived in all theories and will probably always. It is the single most important check on aff advocacy to ensure predictability and ground, and to ensure that the topic is in fact debated. As such, it is largely unnecessary to explain its value absent a rule status. The importance of topicality derives not from arbitrary rule but from its logical status as necessary to determine the limits of affirmative ground. Most compelling topicality arguments focus on the abuse entailed by affirmative interpretation of a particular word, and as such, it makes no sense to conceptualize the impact of topicality as a rules-based voting issue. Instead, the reasons to prefer
Kerpen to page)

the neg interpretation also entail a reason to vote, since they prove the affirmative interpretation is in some way bad for debate. A rules-based reason to vote on topicality would ignore these real, ground-based impacts in favor of an unprovable claim, since the aff should always be able to find a definition they meet, satisfying this nominal burden.

Conclusion

Stock issues can be argued in a rational way that will have understandable impacts in terms of both ground and the resolution of substantive impacts within the debate. When they are ossified and become rules, however, they not only undermine solidly impacted argumentation but also lose all of their own potential value. With this in mind, I recommend that stock issues be taught only as adjuncts to a general cost benefit approach to evaluating debates, and never as rules that must be followed. If the reasons behind a stock issues perspective, whether they be mine or more traditional ones, are in fact valid, then debaters should defend them within the debate; there is no need to impose them as external rules. There is nothing that can be gained from the ossification of debate practice into rules; let the debaters debate.

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