Counterplans as Opportunity Cost: A view of counterplan function in academic debate

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Abstract

This essay presents an evaluation of the counterplan's function in academic debate. It describes the purpose of the counterplan and reasoning for the existence of negative fiat in debate, by explaining reciprocity and competing advocacies. The essay further presents a view of the counterplan as an opportunity cost to plan and explains why this view is best for fairness and education in the round.

Counterplans offer a viable alternative strategy for the negative team that reflects real world decision making and uphold the practices of fairness and education in debate. The counterplan functions as an alternative action that, by its desirability and exclusion of the affirmative plan, serves as a reason to reject plan. This essay posits that the counterplan should be viewed as an opportunity cost to plan, in that it is an alternative possibility for the solution of the harms presented in case or implicit in the resolution that thus excludes the action of plan, which can then be weighed against the plan in terms of costs and benefits.

Roger Solt (1989) explained that "a counterplan is a negative plan (that is, the negative team has designed and specified its details), which is offered to the judge as an alternative possessing coequal status with the plan. (p. 127)" Since, people generally do not evaluate solutions on an individual basis, but instead in comparison with other possibilities (for example, when political candidates or leaders present different options for solving economic problems), a plan versus counterplan debate accurately reflects real world decision making, and thus develops skills that are applicable both in and out of the debate round. It "focuses [the debate] on action and promotes choices between alternatives" (Walker, 1989, p. 181).

However, in order for the negative team to be able to present alternative possibilities for solution rather than simply argue probabilities, or what the status quo will do, the negative must have access to fiat. Fiat is the ability to assume that, for the debate, a plan will pass and assess its benefits and implications rather than the probability of its implementation. Affirmative fiat is grounded in the idea of assessing a plan for its desirability instead of its political feasibility (Solt, 1989), and competitive equity gives rise to the idea that "both sides receive the same fiat" (Katsulas, 1999, p. 74).

Negative fiat then is simply a matter of reciprocity. As Solt (1989, p. 129) explained, "The affirmative is allowed to design in detail a policy and offer it for consideration on its own merits, regardless of its political practicality. Thus, there seems to be at least some equity interest in allowing the negative to design its own policy and advocate its own merits." Without negative fiat, the affirmative team would be allowed to envision possibilities while the negative team would be forced to always defend what is happening or what he or she can prove will happen in the status quo. Since this requires the negative to first prove that an action will happen before addressing the preferability of that argument, while the affirmative merely has to show that an action is preferable, the lack of negative fiat puts the negative at a great disadvantage. By allowing for negative fiat, and thus the presentation of different possibilities for a solution to agreed-upon harms, it is possible to reflect real world decision making and increase the educational value and fairness of the debate round.

Though Solt (1989) restricted negative fiat to U.S. actors, the literature or specific additions to the resolution, Susan Stanfield and Isaac West (1995) offer an explanation of negative fiat in terms of reciprocity that is more ideal for a public style of debate with a changing resolution, like IPDA. They suggest that a fair division of ground would restrict the negative to a single actor (not simply a U.S. actor), such as "the government of any one foreign nation, or any governing body (such as the United Nations or a Non-governmental Organization)."(Stanfield and West, 1995, p. 9). This is particularly important for resolutions addressing problems in other nations, as they point out that "The view that foreign governments cannot solve problems on their own imposes an ethnocentric and hegemonistic view into an activity that strives for the openness of ideas." (Stanfield and West, 1995, p. 10). Thus, the best balance of fairness and education in the round comes from allowing the negative team to fiat any single actor in order to present an alternative possibility for the solution of the presented harms. This creates a single advocacy for the affirmative and the negative that allows for the evaluation of competing solutions.

> This strategy allows negatives to avoid wasting time and losing credibility in banging their heads against irrefutable claims and to invest that time instead in presenting reasonable alternatives to affirmative cases. The negative gives up presumption but gains a major strategic advantage compared to any kind of defense of the present system (Cirlin, 2008).

This understanding of negative's fiat ability is in line with the core values of IPDA argumentation. Cirlin's (2008) interpretation of acceptable refutation discusses the ability of the negative to access counter-plans in IPDA.

Because the resolution directs debate (Solt, 1989, p. 126), negative fiat should reflect affirmative fiat. That is, it should allow for the analysis of a single possible solution for the harms presented in the affirmative case or implied in the resolution. The counterplan should attempt to discount the plan by presenting a solution that would not occur if the plan were enacted, whether it be through the action of an alternate agent (such as the actions of states, different federal departments, different national governments or international governing bodies) or through another course of action. Thus, the counterplan functions as the opportunity cost to the plan.

In his essay, "The Decision-Maker," Michael Korkok (1999) explained opportunity cost:

> For decision-making purposes, a seemingly simple but ultimately subtle answer to the problem of valuation is available: the value of a choice is the difference between its worth and the worth of the best alternative that must be forgone. The worth of the best alternative that must be forgone is called a choice's *opportunity cost*. (p. 64)

The counterplan is the opportunity cost to plan because it presents a better alternative to the plan, and thus allows us to look at the plan as an option instead of as the only option to solve the harms. The application to debate becomes clear:

> The negative team presents counterplans as opportunities that would be sacrificed if the affirmative plan were to be adopted. Counterplan competition with the affirmative plan is just the idea that adoption of the plan would foreclose the opportunity of enacting the counterplan. The decision-rule applied is that the affirmative plan should be adopted if and only if it is better than the competitive counterplan. (Korkok, 1999, p. 64)

This allows us to evaluate affirmative plans in the realm of possibilities in order to find the best possible solution, rather than solely evaluating the plan versus the status quo. The counterplan is thus the next best scenario – the best option that would be forgone due to the action of plan.

For example, in a round with the resolution *The United States should increase aid to Sub-Saharan Africa to combat malaria*; the affirmative team might show that there is a need for 10 million mosquito nets in Sub-Saharan Africa then present the plan that the U.S. government would provide these 10 million mosquito nets. Instead of being forced to show that malaria was not a problem or that nothing beyond the status quo should be done to fix the problem, the negative could then present the counterplan that World Health Organization should give these 10 million mosquito nets to Sub-Saharan Africa along with analysis as to why the World Health Organization would be a better actor. If the World Health Organization were to solve for the harms presented, the U.S. would no longer need to, and thus no longer should, send the mosquito nets. Thus the counterplan provides an opportunity cost to plan, and would discount the validity of plan as the best option to solve the malaria problem.

In her answer to Korkok's analysis, Gina Lane (1999, p. 87) posited that economic opportunity cost theory cannot apply to academic debate because costs can only be incurred directly by the chooser. However, the judge must weigh costs and benefits in any debate round in order to make a decision – the fact that the judge is not the President or Congress does not change the fact that he or she must evaluate the President or Congress's actions as they are presented in the plan. Furthermore, the judge does not role-play as a particular actor but instead "intellectually endorses" (Korkok, 1999, p. 55) the plan or counterplan. The judge cannot perform the actions presented and thus takes the role of endorsing an action as desirable or preferable. When plans are evaluated in terms of what is net beneficial or through cost-benefit analysis, the judge is able to evaluate (and to some extent incur) the costs of possible changes to his or her world in order to assess what is most beneficial.

Even Korkok (1999) overlimited the ability of the judge to evaluate counterplans, and thus the ability of negative teams to present them, by restricting negative fiat to the resolutional actor. This is problematic because it excludes analysis of foreign actors or international bodies, which, as Stanfield and West (1995, p. 10) described, creates an

ethnocentric and imperialistic debate round. Further is does not fit with the analysis of the opportunity cost as the excluded option and the judge as the endorser, not actor, of the plan or counterplan. In the mosquito net example, if the judge chooses to endorse the World Health Organization's action through the counterplan, then the judge forgoes the opportunity cost of endorsing the plan as the best option. John Katsulas (1999, p. 74) explained that "a judge's range of choices are not limited by the real-world decision making authority of the agent of action because the judge's role is to evaluate policy arguments presented by competing advocates." Thus the judge acts in the real world capacity of a citizen evaluating and choosing whether or not to endorse government actions. As a result, the judge can freely evaluate the counterplan as an opportunity cost and thus weight the plan in terms of the alternative solution presented by the counterplan rather than in terms of the harms in the status quo.

Viewing the counterplan as an opportunity cost allows us to evaluate alternative plans to find the best possible solution by looking at the option that is forgone when action is taken. This casts the debate in a framework in which the negative is allowed the same access to analysis of possibilities as the affirmative and in which the judge can evaluate and endorse a policy in terms of competing solutions. This is uniquely beneficial for debate as it applies real world decision-making practices to the debate and allows for critical exploration and analysis of policy options in a fair and educational debate round.

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