

## **Choice Theory, Elaboration Likelihood, and Counterplans as Arguments: A Framework for Evaluating Theory in IPDA Debate.**

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### **Abstract**

*This article argues for the social scientific principles of choice theory and the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion as foundational criteria for the inclusion of theoretical arguments into the context of IPDA debating. Furthermore, this article attempts to illustrate these criteria by advocating an "Argument" framework of rhetorical counterplan theory in the unique space of IPDA debate rounds.*

### **Introduction**

"It is hoped that this discussion accurately represents the development of theory, not as a static presentation, but as an evolving conversation (Broda-Bahm, 1999)". These words were penned by Dr. Ken Broda-Bahm approximately ten years ago in an article attempting to ground the use of negative fiat in intercollegiate policy debate. It is interesting that these words were written around the time that the International Public Debate Association was beginning to take traction and shape. Ten years later, IPDA is a thriving intercollegiate debate division involved in the evolving conversation that Broda-Bahm spoke of in the aforementioned article. Recent issues of the IPDA journal have produced two well written and thought provoking articles that attempt to situate the role of counterplan debate theory in the context of IPDA debating. These recent articles referenced many of the same arguments and concerns expressed by previous authors involved in the rhetorical discussion in regard to issues of counterplans and fiat (Broda-Bahm, 1999).

In some ways, this essay is a response to the articles written by Hodge & Puckett (2009) and Puckett (2010). In other ways, this essay is a voice that seeks to become part of the ever evolving discussion of rhetorical theory and its use and function in the context of intercollegiate debating organizations. Specifically, this essay will make three points regarding the function and framework of debate theory. First, we can gain valuable insights from choice theory that should drive our decisions as a debating community in regard to the theoretical underpinnings and application of theory in IPDA debating. Second, this essay will provide a definitive view of counterplans viewed as arguments. Finally, this essay will clearly explain why counterplans viewed as

arguments will answer important questions raised by both choice theory and recent questions raised by Puckett (2010).

It is important to note that this discussion specifically intends to discuss the role of counterplan debate theory in the context of the International Public Debate Association. Due to the historical pre-existence of intercollegiate debate divisions such as NDT or CEDA debate organizations, the majority of literature written in regard to the theoretical use of counterplans has been written with those specific contexts in mind. Clearly, each debate organization or division has certain characterizations that can be identified that distinguish those divisions as unique formats of debate. Also, it seems reasonable to assume that at times those unique characteristics of a debate division will influence both practice and pedagogy. More relevant to this discussion, it is possible, even likely that the unique vision and framework of IPDA debate should be a driving force when discussing the role of debate theory within its given space. .

#### **IPDA: The Context:**

To understand this, let's begin by taking a look at some of the unique features of IPDA debating. It seems obvious that one of the major claims and benefits of IPDA debate is that of inclusion. This inclusion involves both debate judges and debaters. IPDA debate is one of (if not the only) intercollegiate debate division in the United States that not only allows untrained judges, but embraces untrained judges (Cirlin, 2007). The use of these untrained "lay judges" is designed to force competitors to adapt their unique rhetorical skills to different audiences as needed. This inclusion and often reliance on untrained judges is one important feature that separates IPDA debating apart from its NPDA, CEDA, and NDT counterparts (Lowery, M. (2010).

Another claim made in regard to IPDA is that it is more accessible to unexperienced or "classroom" debaters. In other words, a well educated college (or high school) student could walk out of the classroom and into an IPDA tournament and compete with some level of competence and confidence. This is possible because IPDA debate has focused on real world application and a focus on substantive issues instead of creating a platform that depends upon complex theoretical principles and debate terminology (Eldred, 2009). It would be virtually impossible for a well educated college

(or high school) student to walk into a national level CEDA/NDT debate tournament with no previous training and repeat back the arguments made by their competitors because of the rapid delivery and strong emphasis on debate terminology/jargon. These three factors, untrained judges, accessibility to untrained students, and a focus on real world practicality are three of the most defining and appealing features of IPDA debate.

### **Choice Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model, and IPDA Debating: Pickers and Choosers**

In his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, Barry Schwartz discusses the complex dynamic of human decision making. Early on in this work, Schwartz lays out five basic assumptions that become the outline for his book. This article will argue that three of those assumptions should be incorporated into the framework by which IPDA coaches, debaters, and theorists should view the use of debate theory in the IPDA debating association. Those three premises are:

We would be better off if we embraced a certain voluntary constraint on our freedom of choice, instead of rebelling against them.

We would be better off seeking what was “good enough” instead of seeking the best choices.

We would be better off if we paid less attention to what others around us were doing.

A deeper understanding of these three principles can help to undergird a justification for clear and defined criteria regarding the use and discussion of debate theory as it relates to IPDA debating.

First, why will we be better off if we embrace a certain voluntary constraint on our freedom of choice? While America is a country seemingly built upon the freedom of choice and the motto “more is always better” seems to accurately define the private logic of our nation, research has shown that we suffer from an overload of choices and options to pick from. A recent set of studies, entitled “When Choice is Demotivating”, identified the phenomenon that an overload of choices or complexities actually decreases the quality of decisions made (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Schwartz (2004) explains the phenomenon when he states “A large array of options may discourage consumers, because it forces an increase in the effort that goes into making a decision (pg. 20)”. In other words, the larger the array

of options to pick from, the more difficult and complex the decisions between those options become.

In fact, this overload of options and complexities to choose between has important ramifications that we should examine. According to Schwartz, they turn us from choosers into pickers. Schwartz defines a chooser as “someone who thinks actively about the possibilities before making a decision. A chooser reflects on what’s important to him or her in life. What’s important about the particular decision, and what the short-and long-range consequences of the decision may be (Schwartz, 2004, pg. 75)”. In contrast, a picker according to Schwartz, is someone “With a world of choices rushing by like a music video, all a picker can do is grab this or that and hope for the best (Schwartz, 2004, pg 75)”. Put simply, the greater the amount of choices or complexity an individual is asked to pick from, the more likely they will move from a picker to a chooser.

I believe similar frameworks for the evaluation of arguments or persuasive acts was laid out by Petty and Cacioppo (1980) when they developed the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion. This theory posits that there are two major routes of persuasion. First, the central route which is typified by a well thought out logical exploration of the facts and substantive arguments given for a specific proposition. Second, peripheral route that involves situations where the receiver evaluates messages based on a much less cognitive approach. This peripheral route is characterized by a decision calculus that focuses on issues such as source credibility, style of delivery, emotional appeals, and attractiveness of the sender.

The clear distinction between these two types of message evaluation lies in the ability and/or amount of elaboration involved by the receiver/evaluator of the message. Specifically, two major factors play a role in an individual’s often unconscious decision to use either the central or peripheral route of decision calculus. The factor that plays a role in this calculus is that of motivation. The greater an individual’s motivation to make a positive decision, the greater the likelihood that they will use the more logically well thought out central route of evaluation. The second major deciding factor, of which route to use as an evaluator, is that of the availability of cognitive resources. In this context, cognitive resources would include an individual’s educational level, knowledge of the specific topic, and experience with the given topic. So the lower on the scale an individual falls in terms cognitive resources the more likely they will

default to the more emotional, and at times shallow, peripheral route of argument/persuasion evaluation.

It seems to follow logically that individuals who use the central route of decision calculus are more akin to Schwartz concept of choosers, whereas the individuals who default to the peripheral route of argument calculation would fall more closely into the picker quadrant of Schwartz theory. So to make that clear and simple, if a person uses a central route of decision making, they can be called a chooser, and if they use a peripheral route of decision making, they become a picker by definition.

### **Counterplans as Arguments**

Now let us turn our attention to counterplan theory as it relates to debating in the IPDA. A simple precursor glance at the literature regarding counterplan theory quickly tells the reader several things. First, at times the arguments for certain types of counterplan justifications can be complex. These discussions often include terms such as fiat, counterfactual fiat, permutation theory, plan inclusive, plan exclusive, intrinsic permutations, opportunity cost, counterplans as tests of affirmative advocacy, ground, fairness, net beneficiality, agency counterplans, advocated perms, conditional counterplans, non conditional counterplans etc...

The second thing that becomes quickly apparent is that some of the greatest debate minds in the history of our collective event do not agree with one another when it comes to issues dealing with counterplan theory.

Remember that the majority of the discussions of the above mentioned terms regarding debate theory were voiced out of concerns from collegiate level policy debate divisions, most specifically the CEDA and NDT divisions. While I believe, for reasons that I will mention later, those discussions were valuable in the contexts in which they began, I believe that the IPDA as an organization is a unique space and should hence take a different theoretical approach.

To that end, I would like to advocate that counterplans in the context of IPDA debating should be viewed simply as arguments. No need for fancy names, in depth theoretical explanations, or fast paced philosophical discussion in the midst of a round attempting to justify this or that theory of a given counter plan.

In support of this I would like to advocate that all debate theory should begin with the two initial burdens given to the affirmative and negative

debaters. The affirmative debater begins with the burden of proof and the negative debater begins with the burden of rejoinder. The burden of proof is the expectation the affirmative debater will provide, a case that on face proves the resolution to be true. The burden of rejoinder deals with the expectation that the negative debater will make arguments aimed at attempting to convince the adjudicator that the affirmative debater has not proved the resolution to be true. So basically, the affirmative debater has to prove that the resolution is true, and the negative debater has to prove that the affirmative debater has not met his/her burden. Note, this does not mean that the negative debater has to prove that the resolution is not true, simply that the affirmative debater has not done his/her job.

In the context of policy debate resolutions, affirmative teams generally run parametric cases with some description of harms, plan, and advantages. These plans are set out in the first affirmative speeches and hence construct the focus for the rest of the debate round. At this point the negative debater is responsible to make arguments as to why the judge would reject the affirmative plan advocacy. To this, negative debaters often make case arguments, solvency arguments, critical arguments (deep solvency take outs), and at times employ the use of counterplans as a strategic choice.

For an in depth treatment of the history of counterplan theory and its role in debating, see Hodge and Puckett (2009). While this article doesn't propose a new version of counterplan theory, it does hope to provide a fresh perspective on an historic theory. This article advocates that instead of viewing counterplans as tests or opportunity costs, debaters and judges should simply view counterplans as arguments. In other words, a counterplan is simply an argument deployed by a negative debater in an attempt to fulfill their burden of rejoinder.

It is important to note that a counterplan has to fulfill one of two important logical conclusions, if it is to successfully attack an affirmative plan. In classic debate terminology these two ideas are simply understood as competition standards. For a counterplan to be an effective argument in a debate round, it must ask the judge to favor itself over the plan action advocated by the affirmative debater. To the extent that the counterplan legitimately asks the judge to reject the affirmative plan, the counterplan is said to compete with the affirmative advocacy. Principles of basic logic and historical debate theory clearly lay out two scenarios by which a negative counterplan "competes" with an affirmative advocacy. First, a counterplan competes with

an affirmative plan if it is net beneficial. Second, the counterplan competes with the affirmative plan if it is mutually exclusive of the affirmative plan action. It is important to point out that a negative counterplan must meet only one of the two above standards of competition (net beneficial, mutually exclusive).

First, let us look at the concept of net beneficial. Many debaters and coaches have misunderstood the concept of net beneficial to mean that the counterplan must simply have more benefits than the affirmative plan. Imagine a debate in which the affirmative topically argues that the USFG should guarantee post conviction DNA evidence to be used in all death penalty based court appeals. For the sake of debate, imagine that the affirmative clearly captures the advantage of creating a more fair playing field for all individuals that appeal their death sentences. Now imagine that the negative counterplan is to feed all of the starving kids in the world. Next, the negative argues that the judge should side with them, because they access more benefits than the affirmative team, hence justifying a negative ballot. Any marginal debater will quickly point out that the negative counterplan (while a great idea) never really competes with the affirmative action of ensuring DNA evidence during appeals. In fact, most affirmative will argue that the judge could vote to do both the plan and the counterplan at the end of the round. Then, according to the basic debate responsibilities, the affirmative debater would argue that they have won the round because they accomplished the burden of proof. In other words, while the negative debater may have proved that we should feed starving children, nothing about that argument functions to reject the idea that the USFG should guarantee DNA testing for all death penalty appeals. To this extent, if a negative team claimed that their plan was net beneficial because they solved for more than the affirmative, they would be demonstrating a misunderstanding of true net beneficiality.

For a counterplan to be net beneficial, it must demonstrate that the counterplan is a more beneficial option than the plan alone, and/or the plan plus the counterplan (permutation). In other words the negative team must argue that there is an offensive reason that the counterplan is preferable to either the plan alone or the plan and the counterplan passed simultaneous. To the extent that the negative debater successfully makes this argument, the counterplan is said to compete with the affirmative advocacy, because it asks the judge to pick between the plan and the counterplan by

demonstrating that the two shouldn't coexist. This is usually done by arguing that there is some type of disadvantage that links to the plan avoided by the counterplan. In fact, the disadvantage tacked on to the affirmative plan is often called the net benefit of the counterplan. The second competition standard a negative debater can appeal to is that of mutually exclusivity. In this instance the negative debater must convince the judge that the plan and the counterplan cannot coexist in the same world. It seems clear if there is a world in which the plan and counterplan cannot coexist, the judge is forced to pick between the two. Hence, the counterplan competes with the affirmative plan. Imagine a round where the affirmative plan is to send 10,000 troops into Afghanistan and the negative counterplan is to remove all troops from Afghanistan. It seems clear that the judge can't vote to both send 10,000 troops and remove all troops at the same time. To the extent the plan and counterplan actions are mutually exclusive (can't be done at the same time), the judge is forced to pick between the two competing options.

To the extent that the counterplan asks/forces the judge to pick between itself and the affirmative plan, the counterplan becomes a competitive argument in the round functioning to fulfill the burden of rejoinder. It doesn't matter if the counterplan is an opportunity cost, test, conditional, unconditional, etc. It simply functions as an argument designed to prove that the affirmative has not proved the resolution true.

### **Counterplans Viewed As Arguments: Answering Puckett, Choice Theory +ELM**

#### ***Answering Puckett:***

Puckett (2010) brought up two interesting questions regarding counterplan theory in academic debate. First, the counterplan's inability to access the resolution by the decision maker, and second the fact that giving the negative debater the power of fiat unfairly skewed ground in favor of the negative debater.

In my estimation, viewing a counterplan as an argument clearly answers both of these questions. Puckett frames the first question by stating "the decision-maker can only access if the resolution is true or not; whether the counterplan is better and should be enacted is outside the scope of the decision-maker. The decision maker, by way of the ballot can only vote to NOT do the plan. They can never vote to do the counterplan (2010, pg. 21)". This issue was also asked some ten years ago by Michael Korcock (1999) when he was originally developing his theory of counterplans as opportunity costs, a view that was hotly debated both then and now (Katsulas. J.P. 1999; Lane, G. 1999; Perkins, D. 1999). I think viewing the counterplan as a competing argument



answers this first objection clearly. I agree that the judge is not voting to do the counterplan, but to “NOT do the plan”. According to the counterplan as argument paradigm, a judge would vote against an affirmative team, because the judge deemed that the counterplan upheld the negative burden of rejoinder, hence proving that the affirmative plan did not meet the burden of proof.

The second major objection brought up by Puckett was that “the question is ‘whether the action of the resolution should be taken;’ the question is NOT ‘whether alternative action should be taken (2010, pg. 21)”. According to Puckett, the negative team could never meet this burden, because negative fiat does not exist. Puckett goes on to state that “all negative votes lack access to any action (except inaction) (2010, pg, 22)”. While this is simply a semantic twist, and in one sense I certainly agree with Puckett, this view of counterplans over complexualizes the position for no reason. If one views the competing counterplan simply as an argument in the round, the judge could vote for the negative counterplan simply because it provided a competitive argument that proved that the affirmative team did not uphold their burden of proof. In other words, a vote for the counterplan isn’t a vote for action or non action, it would be a vote for rejoinder.

### ***Choice Theory and ELM:***

Finally, lets return to the beginning of this paper and discuss how viewing counterplans as arguments would most effectively meet the basic assumptions of choice theory. The three basic ideas advocated by choice theory according to Schwartz were:

We would be better off if we embraced a certain voluntary constraints on our freedom of choice, instead of rebelling against them.

We would be better off seeking what was “good enough” instead of seeking the best choices.

We would be better off if we paid less attention to what others around us were doing.

I believe each of these guidelines can give us sound advice when deciding what type of theoretical frameworks to use in the context of parliamentary debate. This can be demonstrated by a quick discussion as to how these relate to the use of theory in IPDA debating.

The first principle asks us to constrain our range of choices and to decrease our complexity. Remember, this position argued that the greater number of choices available and the more complex those choices, the more

complex those choices, the more likely the evaluator is to become a picker instead of a chooser. If there is one thing that I think we can agree on in the community, it is that the majority of us want the judges/critics in our rounds to be choosers instead of pickers. We want our critics to evaluate the depth and substance of our arguments instead of defaulting to peripheral based selection criteria deployed by those judges who, because of a lack of motivation and/or cognitive ability, choose to not make evaluations from a central route of decision making. To the extent that we intentionally and knowingly endorse overly complex theoretical models of argument, we as a community will create a system that makes the role of effective judging infinitely more difficult. I believe that the IPDA community would be benefited by seeking out the most simplistic (yet logical) model of theoretical underpinning in relations to its use of debate theory in debate rounds. Using less complex models of theoretical meta-debate will allow the debaters more time and opportunity to focus on the more important real world and substantive issues of case debate.

Since many IPDA judges are not well schooled in historic debate theory and often have no experience evaluating the philosophical components of complex debate terminology, I believe it would be beneficial to adopt the most simplistic version of theoretical framework possible. In relationship to counterplan debating, I believe that framework would be to explain a counterplan as simply another competitive argument within the round that asks the critic to reject the affirmative team. It seems that there is no need to explain the intricate details of opportunity cost so eloquently articulated by its pundits (Hodge & Puckett, 1999). There is no substantive need to appeal to complex economic theory in an attempt to justify negative fiat in relationship to decision maker voting paradigms.

I can imagine the blank eyes of the “first time critic”, as two experienced debaters begin to pontificate about the rejection of the negative counterplan, because they have abused the basic reciprocal nature of fiat etc.....Given the fact that the judges tend to have little experience with this type of theoretical material, this type of complexity runs the risk of turning an otherwise good judge into a picker rather than a chooser, simply due to the complexity of the argument. Why take that risk when you can simply explain that your counterplan functions just like any other negative position in the round? It is an argument.

The second principle of choice theory deals with the idea that we should be seeking choices that are “good enough” instead of the best options. One quick

look at the 1999 edition of the Journal of Contemporary Argumentation and Debate will show several brilliant theorists in search of the best way to run counterplans in debate rounds. I believe that the IPDA debate community should reject the temptation to enter in to this overly complex discussion and simply adopt a view of counterplans as competing arguments. Clearly this view is sound both logically and theoretically. To that end, clearly counterplans viewed as arguments is a framework that will suffice within the given time limits, judging parameters, and mission of the IPDA as an organization.

The final principle laid out by Schwartz in relation to choice theory argues that we would be better off if we didn't compare ourselves to what everyone else around us is doing. I think this is sound advice that the IPDA community has been taking for a while. While I believe that there is a place to have in depth theoretical discussions regarding debate frameworks, I don't believe that those discussions should be taking place in IPDA debate rounds. It seems antithetical to the genetic make-up and vision of the activity. These types of discussions seem to exclude individuals who have not been schooled in debate theory and terminologies. Due to the fact that IPDA has untrained judges, smaller time limits, and self imposed limits on rapid delivery methods, IPDA debate rounds do not serve as good grounds for in depth theoretical argumentation. In contrast, I believe IPDA debate rounds would be truer to spirit and better served by having in depth discussions of substantive policy issues relating to germane ideas connected to the actual resolution area.

**Conclusion:**

In a world where high complexity and infinite choices have been valued, recent research has proven that this increased arena of choice has not come without its costs. IPDA is a debate community like no other in the United States. It has largely stayed true to its mission of creating a debate format that is accessible to individuals of all backgrounds, while providing a high level of training for real world situations. This article has argued to use choice theory as a foundational framework for evaluating the use of theory arguments in the context of the IPDA debate community. It also advocated the use of counterplans as arguments as the best way to implement counterplan theory into the IPDA debating context. Clearly, this view of counterplans can assist the IPDA in maintaining the integrity of the event by creating space for more substantive argumentation and less procedural focus. Hopefully, this article will be part of a larger discussion relating to the ever advancing principles and use of rhetorical strategies in the context of the IPDA community.

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