VALUE PROPOSITION DEBATE: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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In 1797, Daniel Webster and his fellow undergraduates doubtless enthralled
Dartmouth audiences with debates on such subjects as: Is celibacy justifiable?
Are widows better than old maids? or Is European despotism justifiable? Value
proposition debate was much favored and practiced by the gentlemen of Harvard,
Yale and other noble institutions well into the twentieth century. However,
whether due to The War, Lost Innocence, the emergence of the interscholastic
tournament or simple ennui, emphasis was gradually shifted to propositions of
policy and value proposition debate became a disfavored bridesmaid. Value
propositions were reserved for audience and classroom debate; policy propo-
sitions were featured in competition (Baird, 1950, p. 20; Faules and Rieke, 1968).

Value proposition debate, however, is far from extinct. In fact the
increasing popularity of value propositions on the ballot for the national
collegiate debate resolution, as well as the increasing incidence of value topic
divisions, such as those sponsored by CEDA, at tournaments previously committed
wholly to policy debate, suggests the bridesmaid may yet make it to the alter.
In view of the increased interest in value proposition debate, I will offer
pragmatic suggestions for those who venture into unknown territory.

Value proposition debate centers around considerations of belief, rather
than action. As McBurney states:

> A problem of value is essentially one of appraisal...
> (the questions attempt to assess the goodness or
> badness, rightness or wrongness, merit or demerit
> of persons or things (1950, p. 21).

Ask a novice policy debater for the definition of value proposition debate, or VPD, and he will most likely respond "Debate without a plan." This view is echoed in debate texts:

> The proposition of value...asserts an evaluation of an idea, a person or a policy, (but) does not suggest courses of action to be taken as a consequence (Moulton, 1966, p. 58).

Examples of value propositions might include: Capital punishment is unjustifiable; Education has failed its mission; Rights given to accused persons unduly hinder law enforcement agencies; Murder is a punishable offense or Woman is man's equal. In contrast, policy propositions on these same topics could state: Capital punishment should be abolished; The Federal government should significantly improve the quality of education; The right to pre-indictment counsel should be abolished; John Smith murdered and should hang or The ERA should be adopted. Subject, specificity and direction are topic-specific; considerations of value or policy only direct the focus of the argumentation.

Perhaps the abstract nature of many value topics have led theorists to consign VPD to television talk shows (Wood, 1975, p. 11), philosophy (Thompson, 1971, p. 19) or "Bull sessions" (Wood, p. 11). Some authors dismiss VPD as "rare" (Moulton, p. 59), or confuse VPD with debates on fact or definitions (Baird, p. 23; McBurney, p. 27; Ehninger and Brockriede, 1968, p. 222). If argumentation strategies are discussed, the discussion is oriented to the goals-criteria approach exclusively (McBurney, p. 22; Wood, p. 12; Ehninger, p. 221).

Such limitations on VPD are silly. Debate, be it policy or value, cannot proceed without consideration of values: the sanctity of human life, the desirability of efficiency, equity, the need to save money are integral to debate. Further, academic debate increasingly argues such values: When is it no longer justifiable to save a life? What degree of risk makes a policy unacceptable? Are domestic lives inherently more valuable than foreign lives?

And VPD implies policy: Could the value to held without societal cost?
Societal disruption? What policies would have to change if the value base were
altered?

There is no such thing as "pure" value or "pure" policy debate in practice,
even if supportable in theory. Debate is a mutable process that changes per-
spectives on counterplans, turnarounds, topicality and burden of proof without
undue tears. Therefore, although the degree of crossover between values and
policy hinges upon the individuals debating, as well as the individual debate,
consideration of VPD strategies is appropriate for all debaters, thus, I make
the following suggestions.

Topicality

In policy debate topicality covers such issues as extratopicality, subtop-
icality or antitopicality; the basic issue is whether the affirmative case can
properly be considered under the resolution. In value debate, without a plan to
serve as a validation of topicality, the affirmative case stands as the sole
interpretation of the resolution. It is, therefore, not a partial issue. If the
Negative succeeds in winning topicality there is a total victory. It is winner-
takes-all, definitely.

Specific strategies for arguing this all-important issue include use of
definitions, parameters, and common usage. In a goals-criteria case, "Value
extrapolation" may be used. This extrapolation simply asks if the single case
under consideration would be sufficient to adopt the resolutional value as a
whole, thus considering the individual case as either symbol or metaphor for the
entire topic. The best Affirmative solution, of course, is to offer a topical case.

Affirmative Strategies

Once the question of topicality is decided, the affirmative team has several

options as regards case structure. As the affirmative strategy relies in large

part upon the negative response, the wise affirmative team will indulge in pre-

clusive planning. Six basic techniques are: Goals; justification; piecemeal

indictment; philosophical indictment; qualitative indictment and the combination

approach.

Goals

Like topicality, goals-criteria tend to be an all or nothing proposition.

The Affirmative sets criteria, then attempts to demonstrate the failure of the

status quo to meet those criteria (McBurney, p. 22). The criteria may be derived

from goals of the current system or fabricated from other sources. The Negative

argues the status quo can or is meeting the goal, rejects the criteria or offers

superior criteria for the evaluation of the present system.

Within this simple scheme lurk opportunities for deviation. The failures of

the status quo may be qualitative, quantitative, philosophical or a combination of

ills. The failure may, depending on the skill of the Affirmative, be identified

as past, present or future. The criteria may come from God or some other non-

ascertainable source. And especially important, the goal may be so resemble the

topic that acknowledging the goal may effectively undermine further negative

argumentation. This is quite different from policy debate, where the affirmative

must sustain the greater burden of supporting the goal both with the need area

and the advantage area.

Justification

At the most facile level of justification, the affirming team requests the

Negative to justify the existence of a current policy in particular, or the whole

system in general, in effect reversing the traditional notion of burden of proof.

By indicting some single aspect of the present system, and then demanding, as harm

has been shown, that the Negative not merely refute the demonstrated harm, but

support the rationale for the entire belief system operant maximizes slight significance and forces the Negative to the defensive on both what he defends and why he defends it. The strategy is based in the assumption that for a value to be acceptable, the system must support it without exception; one inequity damns the whole. However, even first negative speakers are usually not so foolish as to discard presumption at the outset, this tactic is rarely 100% effective.

The justification technique exemplies the judgemental style of VPD. The emphasis is upon philosophy, rather than evidence. While many debaters feel naked without their stock of back-up cards, this VPD tactic places a premium upon fresh and logical thinking if done well. When faced with a creative exploration of the underpinings of society, the Negative faces large temptation to claim a lack of affirmative significance and punt.

Piecemeal Indictment

A kissing cousin to the hypothesis-testing view in policy debate, the Affirmative does not focus on a single line of attack, but rather lists harms, goals and other detractions from the viability of the present system. The mix and match case that results is often highly inconsistent, but differs from the standard alternative justification case in that it is not hampered by multiple plans.

The Negative must follow two proceedures: first, the divergent areas must be refuted as countered, but, also, particular care must be taken to point out affirmative contradiction, and to simultaneously avoid contradiction on the negative.

Philosophical Justification

Even more ephemeral than the justification case, with philosophical justification all arguments and issues operate in the abstract. Philosophy only is advanced by the Affirmative, only counter philosophy is expected. Evidence, unless it pertains to the abstractions, is superfluous.

When confronted with a philosophical justification case, the Negative may argue on a philosophical plane; or, it may argue in concrete terms and run the risk of having an apples and oranges debate, with the critic as fruit selector. The Negative may also argue issue realizations, as discussed below.

Qualitative Indictment

Qualitative indictment bases significance on examples, rather than on statistics. The focus lies in the exception to the rule, rather than in the validity of the rule itself. This is best effected if the significance of the harm area is low in incidence, but the examples are very graphic; cases concerning small children are easily argued in this manner.

To combat this tactic, the Negative must try to expand beyond the idiosyncratic exception, or else present counter examples. In certain cases, where the examples are well-known, they may be individually refutable.

Combination

A combination approach simply combines the above approaches, yet avoids contradictions and gaps in reasoning. The Negative, in addition to using other appropriate strategies, exploits any added case flaws. Both teams run a severe risk of overextension; too many arguments are particularly horrible when based upon philosophical considerations. Both Affirmative and Negative stands to lose when a debate becomes verbose or muddled.

As can be deduced from the strategies outlined above, the stock issues of inherency and significance are present in VPD. Indeed, those are of prime importance as there is no plan area to take some of the burden of the attacks. It is in the best interests of the Affirmative to plan their case so as to distribute anticipated attacks in the manner most easily refuted. Of course, there are no rules forcing the Negative to sit still while the Affirmative schemes,

therefore, we must also consider tactics for the staunch defenders of the status quo.

Negative Strategies

Instead of the usual policy debate strategy of attacking the case in the first negative constructive speech, and the plan in the second negative constructive speech, the lack of an affirmative proposal denies this division of labor. Without a clear argumentative strategy, a second negative speaker reiterates his partner's case attacks, thus wasting constructive time and pre-empting the first negative rebuttal, and bores the judge. Sadly, this duplicative tactic is usual in VPD.

Rather than time wasting redundancy, the Negative should consider the following options: Division, status quo defense, value manifestation attacks, combination refutation or a countercase. With planning, the second speaker can be an asset instead of a liability. In policy debate the negative duties are predetermined; VPD maximizes the potential of the negative by permitting discretion in assuming speaker duties.

Division

Division of duties is based on "straight" refutation of the affirmative case, but allows the speakers to divide the case, or the issues, into two parts. Neither speaker infringes upon the territory taken by the other until the second negative rebuttal. The technique is very workable, especially after the team has had practice at respecting each other's areas, allows several options as regards case division and maximizes time. The strategy can be embarrassing, however, if a clever second affirmative pre-empts further attacks in his constructive speech.

Status Quo Defense

This strategy is particularly attractive if the first speaker is a novice and the second speaker is more skilled. The first speaker does a song and dance

routine about the value related merits of the status quo, leaving direct refutation of the case to his partner. Not only is this independent defense strategy particularly good against a justification, goal or qualification affirmative case, but inclusion of abstract arguments fits it for philosophical refutation as well. By building a strong negative case without direct reference to the Affirmative indictments, the Negative forces the Affirmative away from their affirmative case and towards negative ground. A second affirmative speaker who must refute the merits of the status quo as a whole is at far more of a disadvantage than if he were arguing his own case; this technique further allows the second negative speaker to issue his case attacks just prior to rebuttals, which saddles the Affirmative with a large burden of refutation following the negative block.

A well-prepared Affirmative thwarts such tactics by judicious construction of the affirmative case, refuting or dismissing the negative case and extending the affirmative case during constructives regardless of negative distractions. Most importantly, the Affirmative must place their own case in a position strong enough to overcome the persuasive appeal of the negative praise of present policies.

Value Manifestations

If policy debate is unable to avoid arguments on questions of value, then VPD is similarly unable to avoid questions of policy. However, because there is no plan offered in VPD, terms like "value manifestation" or "issue realization" must be applied.

The "manifestation" attack strategy differs from the usual series of plan objections in that there is no explicit plan, only an inferred plan. This presents an unusual option: if the Negative has sufficient skill, the Affirmative can be indicted for disadvantages resulting from all possible plans, or, in keeping with the tentative nature of the tactic, all plan possibilities. While a careless Negative could spread himself too thin, or delve into tangential areas

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easily dismissed as non-applicable, assaulting a variety of plan premises, or value manifestations, effectively thwarts acceptance of the value. At the least the Affirmative, incongrously, is forced to defend a policy.

Not only do value manifestations offer a novel avenue of attack on a VPD case, but inserting pragmatic considerations into a round may be the most effective counter for a highly abstract affirmative case. The strategy could conceivably be accused of pulling inappropriate arguments into VPD. However, inasmuch as there can be no clear demarcation between values and policy, and because there are policies indicated by every value, value manifestations offer an acceptable means of orienting VPD to the real world.

Combination

As with the combination affirmative, this tactic needs little explanation. Coverage could well be a problem for both teams and consistency must be considered. It would be ironic to have a non-plan plan objection contradict a non-case case while direct refutation is let slide. The above strategies and their combination should be undertaken with caution, and care must be taken to explain to both critic and opponents precisely what you are presenting, and what you hope will be the impact of that presentation.

Countercase

The possibility of a countercase strategy both intrigues and confuses. What happens to the issue of topicality? Would a specific value manifestation be included as a part of the counter case? Would the restricted scope of the topic reduce the need for competitiveness?

While the plausibility of a countercase in VPD now, may seem as remote as a counterplan in policy debate ten years ago, two possibilities suggest themselves: countercase and conditional countercase.

The countercase would have to admit the harm indicated by the Affirmative, but would trace the cause to alternate sources. The causality or the rationale

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behind the countercase must in no way fall under the resolution; as with a counterplan, the counter case cannot be topical or else both teams would support adoption of the resolution and the debate would immediately go to the Affirmative. A conditional counter case would also argue alternative justification, but would not sacrifice the negative tactic of reducing the affirmative significance, Similarily, the conditional argument would have to avoid topicality. Rather than arguing competitiveness in the plan or advantage area, the case and the countercase would have to be competitive in the area of significance. The best case, therefore, would be the one that offered the most accurate explanation of the harm. Conceivably, comparison between case and countercase, both as regards competitiveness and overall credibility, could be argued from philosophy or value manifestation. However, such argumentation could only deteriorate into speculation of the angels on a pin head variety.

This paper should serve as a starting point, on both a pragmatic and a theoretical level, for the coach or a practitioner of VPD. Of more interest to communication theorists, however, is the emphasis that VPD places upon debate as a function of attitude formation, rather than a comparison of the results of attitude systems. After all, whether the subject was spinsters, despotism or celibacy, when Daniel Webster debated, people listened.

Suggested Reading

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