

## **FLEXIBLE DEBATE TOPICS REVISITED: THE CASE FOR LOGICAL LIMITED RESOLUTIONAL CONDITIONALITY**

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Abstract: As a response to the complexities of topic selection, the collegiate policy debate community should adopt a system of topic flexibility or, in debate parlance, logical resolitional conditionality. This proposal would allow for the resolution to be modified through editing, subtraction, or addition. Despite the single topic's long history, the addition of flexibility could be a refreshing alternative for many debaters and coaches. Three main benefits could be met through the addition of flexibility: (1) relief from the daunting task of resolitional precision, (2) a solution to topic fatigue and monotony, and (3) variability that could adjust to changing world conditions.

*"Selecting an official question is not all beer and skittles. It means a lot of work and requires a lot of machinery." – The Forensic, 1938*

As long as there have been debate resolutions and propositions, there have been complaints about their effectiveness and precision. Soon after the establishment of a single national resolution in the twenties (McBath & Auerbach, 1967), complaints began about the resolutions found the pages of communication journals about the "looseness of wordings" (Taylor & Barnard, 1930, p. 359) and "indefinite phrasing" (Nichols, 1934, as cited in Rose, 1969, p. 4). In 1935, Alan Nichols related the problems confronted when debating the proposition "Resolved that Congress should enact legislation providing for the centralized control of industry;" he narrates "no two persons appeared able to agree upon just what 'centralized control of industry' did mean... debaters discussed almost everything from socialism to the unified administration of reindeer in Alaska" (p. 359). Nichols' solution to the problem of the inherent ambiguity presented was to

propose that the framers release with the resolution "resumé of its context" (p. 168), providing 500 words to reveal the committee's intent. The quaintness of Nichols' minimal suggestion in contrast to the voluminous context given by the most recent topic committee's library of resources (Stables, 2010) demonstrates how far collegiate debate has gone in the pursuit of resolitional perfection. The perpetual focus on topic selection belies an important fact – the topic itself is an important mechanism of debate's pedagogical, institutional, and public missions. As Leeper (2010) suggests, the resolution is the "critical variable" (p. 160) in the function of academic debate as a whole. The exigency for this very forum (i.e., the difficulty in topic selection) demonstrates the need to *carefully and intentionally* consider all parts of the topic process.

With an understanding of the long history and pragmatic value of our single topic model, I propose that we reconsider the most basic presumption of topic selection – that there is only one single unconditional resolution for the academic year. The debate community's rationale for a single topic season has been largely taken for granted in recent years. The ancestor of the single topic concept was birthed by Pi Kappa Delta's idea of a unified resolution in 1921 for their annual convention. The idea of a single national proposition gradually took hold throughout the subsequent decades (Rose, 1969), more through circumstance than planning, as schools began to debate the Pi Kappa Delta topic throughout the entire season (McBath & Auerbach, 1967). At the time, the primary justification for the development was largely pragmatic "convenience" (Finley, 1931, p. 16), as it allowed schools from diverse parts of the country to meet at national tournaments. Current justifications for this practice anecdotally rely on focused in-depth research and simplicity, although there is a dearth of published material supporting these arguments.

Instead of accepting this situation as inevitable, it is my contention that the collegiate policy debate community move towards topic flexibility or, in debate parlance, logical resolitional conditionality. This suggestion is not new, in the near century of debating a single topic, a few debate scholars have suggested alternatives to the single topic system (Crawford, 1971; Gregg, 1958; Murphy, 1942; Torrence, 1965). Unfortunately, these calls have gone unheeded despite the recurrence of the concerns (e.g., argument stagnation, tiresome topics, inability to address contemporary problems, etc.) raised in their arguments. Therefore, the topic should be flexible, allowing for the resolution to be modified through editing, subtraction, or addition. I will make a distinction, however, between flexible and multiple topics. My suggestion is not to have more than one topic per year (e.g., CEDA's semester-long topics, or NFL LD's two month topic structure). Rather, this suggestion maintains a single topic area, but adds resolitional flexibility. For example, in my proposed scheme, this year's immigration topic could have been modified at mid-season to allow visas for undocumented workers. Given the significant change embodied in this proposal, I will provide both arguments in favor of my proposal, some brief responses to possible objections, and a description of how the process might work. Despite the single topic's long history, the addition of flexibility could be a refreshing alternative for many debaters and coaches. Three main benefits could be met through the addition of flexibility: (1) relief from the daunting task of resolitional precision, (2) a solution to topic fatigue and monotony, and (3) variability that could adjust to changing world conditions.

First, inflexible topics produce the need for exacting resolutions at the beginning of the year. The collegiate debate community is nothing if not thoroughly obsessed with the precision and appropriateness of topic and

resolution selection. In the past, complaints over topic selection originated from "lack of thorough understanding" (Stromer, 1959, p. 322). As early as 1927, Adams laments that "no one thing has been more detrimental to high-school debating than the selection by a state committee of a proposition that is not only incorrect technically but uninteresting to both speakers and hearers" (p. 540). Yet, in more recent years, demands on the topic selection process have become so intense that for the 2010-11 topic wording selection alone, the topic committee produced 31 separate reports comprising over 350 pages of research to devise the immigration resolution (Stables, 2010). Yet, as Kenneth Burke might say, this process is "rotten with perfection" (1966, p. 16). The drive to perfection is always chasing after an unattainable end: no one could reasonably assess the entire voluminous topic research, let alone synthesize that knowledge into the best topic wordings. Bearing witness to this inevitable imperfection is our present experience of debating the immigration resolution itself. My personal (and completely unscientific) survey of debate coaches and participants has found at least moderate dissatisfaction with the nature and quality of debates provoked by the current resolution, despite the gargantuan effort put into its construction. My point is not to demean the unrewarding and tedious process of topic selection. Rather, I propose that the debate community would be well served by accepting the inevitable inaccuracy of the topic selection process. Prior attempts to fix the topic selection process have continuously added more and more research (Freeley, 1969). A flexible topic, as Murphy (1942) argues, would "spare" the topic committee of "the difficulties of phrasing the all-perfect, all-enduring proposition" (p. 165). The debate season itself could be the "experimental" (p. 164) testing ground of the topic. The thousands of debates performed each year already serve the function of pronouncing the success of any given wording. If we take seriously the idea that the

practice of debate acts as a laboratory (Thomas, 1980), then the resolution itself could be subject to testing and revision through the research, preparation and debate competitions, in this scientific analogy. There is no better way, in my opinion, to test the effectiveness of a topic than by debating and researching it. Rather than placing the burden of textual perfection and research on the topic committee, flexible and conditional testing would allow the resolution to get better as the year progressed, making the debates at the end of the season national tournaments most effective.

Second, inflexible topics create what Crawford (1971) labels “topic fatigue,” “monotony,” and stagnant debates (p. 119). Recent experience demonstrates the problems of being locked into a single resolution for an entire nine-month long season; the increasing depth of research allowed by new mediums of information magnifies any small or large problem in topic conceptualization or wording. For instance, the increasingly technical and narrow resolutions provided by the topic committee create exactly small bounds for affirmative action. Consider the specificity of the 2010-2011 phrasing for topical plan action: “substantially increase the number of and/or substantially expand beneficiary eligibility.” The technical precision of these legalistic actions ostensibly demands very limited expansion of either visa quotas or eligibility only in the area of existing channels of legal immigration. Moreover, affirmatives are limited to the question of four types of visas: “employment-based immigrant visas, nonimmigrant temporary worker visas, family-based visas, human trafficking-based visas.” The vast majorities of affirmatives were forced to either lift the quotas on skilled workers visas or address problems in trafficking visa systems. The argumentative problem with these limited plan mechanisms is the redundancy of harms and advantages areas. For the skilled worker visa category,

the most fundamental justifications for policy change are improving the economy and American competitiveness in topic literature. Some other arguments exist on the margins, but this search for obscure advantage areas can strain credibility (e.g., skilled workers are critical for nanoweapon development). The overwhelming monotony of the immigration topic is so severe that an elimination debate at the California State University, Fullerton tournament between Emory University and Northwestern University was conducted on the previous year’s nuclear weapons topic. Emory has even announced that the offer to debate the nuclear topic is “always on the table” (Inamullah, 2011). Yet, the immigration topic is not an anomaly; we cannot simply pick a “better” topic as the previous discussion of the inevitable imperfection of topic wordings attests. Rather, the unconditional and static nature of our increasingly technical resolutions will continue to produce similar results.

The repetitive nature of single topic debates consistently stifles debater interest and creativity. The resulting lack of enthusiasm has serious consequences for student retention and the appeal of the debate community to the public at large. A static topic has the potential to create fatigue and the perception of monotony among students and coaches (Crawford, 1971; Murphy, 1942). For some, the resulting focused research (depth) could be viewed as an advantage to the current system (Fritch, 1993/1994; Panetta, 1990; Parcher, 1998; Rowland, 1995). Nonetheless, not even research depth is immune from the law of diminishing returns. In the early part of the century, when the single topic was conceived, the length of the debate season was much shorter, at most 40 or 50 debates per team (Crawford, 1971). Today, a national debate team can have anywhere from 90 to 100 debates in a typical season (DebateResults, 2011). Momentarily accepting that a season of 100 debates produces sufficiently deep

research, would 150 be too many, causing stagnation? 200? If, in fact, there is no marginal utility to research depth vis-à-vis stagnation, it should follow that debate resolutions should be multi-year affairs! The recurring dialectical tension between flexibility and a limited scope of research demonstrates that the debate community accepts the principle that there is a point at which too much focus on a single issue is, in fact, possible.

Stagnant or monotonous topics are not simply anecdotal. Here, the study of “information overload” is instructive, as empirical research has consistently found that there are diminishing returns to ever more information: “the quality of decisions or reasoning ... correlates positively with the amount of information he or she receives—up to a certain point. If further information is provided beyond this point, the performance of the individual will rapidly decline” (Eppler & Mengis, 2004, p. 326). A similar principle can be observed in the practice of debate: the quality of debating will improve with the amount of debates on a single topic, but only up to a certain point. As novel debate arguments are exhausted and perfected, the quality of debates and participant enthusiasm will rapidly decline. A flexible resolution would allow the debate community to harness the cognitive principle of information overload, which is difficult to predict in advance (in topic committee deliberations), rather than resist it. If debaters and coaches found that the topic was too large or too small based on actual debate practice, they could adjust the resolution to meet the needs of students. While the topic area would be static, the flexibility to add to the resolution would open related research areas that could allow students to draw upon their preexisting topic knowledge and make new connections. This would have profound implications for the vital debates at the end of the season, which have national championships at stake. As Murphy (1942) argues, “final debates could be

culminations, rather than fatigued anti-climaxes” (p. 165). Rather than accepting that these very last debate rounds of the season will center on obscure minutia, a system with flexibility would promote abundant creativity at the final tournaments of each year.

Proponents of in-depth debate research are likely to object to this flexible topic proposal. Admittedly, it is important to note that student research abilities are of primary concern for educational decision-makers. The Association of College and Research Libraries has found that incoming college students face new educational challenges and deficiencies. The nature of the information has transformed from scarcity to overabundance (Wurman, 2000). Consequently, students do not lack sources of information, rather they have an inability to conduct complex research, evaluate information quality and synthesize new information (Mahaffy, 2006). Insofar as debate hopes to continue to be an innovative and research-intensive practice, it needs to adjust to these emerging educational needs. While the information economy has exponentially broadened, debate has moved in an opposite, narrowing direction, over-privileging depth of research. For instance, Parcher (1998) argues that a “common research goal of a debate team is to examine every piece of published material in existence on a given topic” (p. 6). In the previous age of information scarcity, a limited topic was beneficial because students learned to search limited sources with precision. Certainly, in-depth research will continue to be a valuable educational outcome for academic debate, teaching students to consider complex questions in detail. Yet, the primary research skill promoted by a static topic, *complete access* to encyclopedic knowledge, is made less unique by expansive information already available to all. In fact, Jenkins’s (2009) MacArthur Foundation report on 21<sup>st</sup> century education posits that “students... must learn

to recognize the relationship between information coming at them from multiple directions and making reasonable hypotheses and models based on partial, fragmented, or intermittent information” (p. 36). The prioritization of in-depth research teaches students only the skills necessary for *comprehensive access* to information, rather than focusing on the ability to *engage, prioritize, and synthesize* knowledge that may be fragmented and emerge from different areas of inquiry. These broad-based knowledge management skills do provisionally exist in debate training but are limited by a single inflexible topic. Newly vital outcomes of debate research training are student’s ability to dexterously navigate multiple search platforms, rapidly assess the quality and types of arguments and synthesize this information in one’s own work (Edwards, 2006; Mitchell, 2010). The uptake for crafting topics from this insight is that we must reevaluate how research education is understood. The main benefit of a single inflexible topic is stability throughout the season; this static research focus stresses repetitive in-depth inquiry in a limited set of areas. Consequently, the in-depth focused model limits student’s exploration and synthesis of new information. A flexible topic would allow students to maximize the profit of their rapid and dexterous research literacy by promoting inventive synthesis of new ideas and connecting extant knowledge competency to novel research areas.

The third drawback to fixed resolutions is the inability of the proposition to adjust to changing world conditions. The result has been to choose topics that are paradoxically outside of public controversy. In-depth focus on a topic that has little relevance to public controversy could be arguably counterproductive to the educational value of debate inquiry. In the case of the immigration topic, the community’s fear of dynamic political environments pushed the topic selection towards an ever more specific resolutive mechanism (visas) that was removed from

public controversy, eliminating argument on most salient and relevant immigration debates – undocumented workers. The fear of the status quo has long haunted topic selection. In 1966, the Committee on Intercollegiate Discussion and Debate instructed voters in making their choice for the yearly resolution to ask “is there a high degree of probability that the *status quo* will *not* change during the debate season?” (Brock, 1968, p. 44). The result then, as now, was that debate topics became “so sterile” as to “not participate in meaningful controversy” (Torrence, 1965, p. 334) and “were only peripherally relevant” to contemporary concerns (Cripe & Walwik, 1967, p. 10). The separation of college debate from public controversy was put in stark contrast by comparison to the forceful student advocacy of late sixties creating a “reality gap” that contributed in part to the diminishing appeal of college debate (Brockriede, 1970). More recently, the dynamism inherent in the world has been loosely labeled by coaches as “the Obama problem” (Galloway, 2009). That is, the problem that President Obama might take liberal actions that will change the course of debates on topic. Even when the topic itself may be controversial, steps are taken to choose affirmative mechanisms that avoid resolutive actions from overlapping with these potential changes (Hester, 2009). In the topic deliberations for the immigration topic wordings, the topic committee advised against the inclusion of asylum and refugee issues explicitly because of the possibility of change in the status quo; as they put it, they had a “uniqueness concern” (Galloway, 2010, p. 10). The perversity of choosing topics and resolutions that are not relevant to larger public debates is clear; it drives debate out of the mainstream and towards obscure topics only appreciated by debate coaches. A flexible topic would alleviate concerns about change in the status quo. If President Obama took an action that was included in the resolutive wording, the resolution could be modified to adapt to this change. This

dynamic system would also allow the addition of new breaking areas of national concern that might occur during the yearlong debate season (Crawford, 1971). To unchain ourselves from the fear of the status quo, or narrowing the “reality gap,” we should allow debaters and coaches to choose topics that are relevant to both their own lives and the public at large.

As a means of conclusion, I will provisionally suggest mechanisms by which a flexible topic might be implemented. It should be noted that a probable explanation for the single fixed topic is its simplicity. However, I believe that innovation can keep debate practice at its best if we make improvements intentionally rather than accepting the simplicity of the status quo and letting changes happen geologically. Other debate systems that use multiple topics in a season invariably change entire topics/resolutions from period to period (e.g., NFL Public Forum and Lincoln Douglas, CEDA prior to the merger). The value of flexibility in these forms of debate is that they require less investment in any given topic, lowering the barriers to entry (Schiappa & Keehner, 1990). While this concern with barriers to entry is contested, the provisional alternative I am proposing here does not rely on the notion that sustained focus on a broad topic area is counter-productive. Rather, to return to the prior distinction between topic areas and resolutions, it is possible to retain a singular topic or controversy and have variable resolutions that fit within that range of issues. In this proposed system, the debate community would choose in the spring, as it does now, the broad controversy area and the resolution for the start of the season would likely still be released in late July. The difference would be that at predetermined junctures in the season (prior to Christmas break or before the district qualifiers), the community could suggest and vote on changes in the resolution itself. Needless to say, the standing rules of the

NDT and CEDA would also need to be modified for this system to succeed. The decision on what changes were available could be done either by the topic committee or through suggestions from interested parties. The CEDA topic voting system has proven efficient enough that voting on changes to the resolution could be done within a few days. If the trend of list-style resolutions continue, adding new areas or subtracting stale or outdated areas would be possible. If a treaty in the resolution has been ratified, it could be removed. Certainly, a few ground rules would need to be established because the options for alteration may need to have some limits. The direction of resolitional action should likely remain the same (e.g., the resolution could not change from “pressure China” to “appease China”). I think it would be important that “no change” be an available option in these mid-season votes. While there are likely other safeguards against topic anarchy that could be added, this provisional system would resolve the disadvantages of the static topic while retaining the benefits focus on a broader controversy.

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