

CAD FORUM

INTRODUCTION: INTERCOLLEGIATE POLICY DEBATE TOPIC SELECTION

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Few features are as distinctive for intercollegiate policy debate as the presence of a single topic for an entire competition season. Today, thousands of students each year debate the single topic that is determined by community vote. Decades of single-topic selection have provided an interesting window into the communities debating those topics. This process currently combines community voting and the work of a specifically tasked CEDA committee to produce those topics. As a member of that committee since 2006, and the chair since 2008, I have been fortunate to observe the unique dynamics of topic selection. This forum provides an opportunity removed from the deadlines of selecting a new topic to examine the broader challenges of this task. We are fortunate to share the perspectives of a collection of very talented coaches. In the following pages, we share reflections by Aaron Hardy on the rise of a core series of negative arguments, a proposal to encourage more formal topic rotation by Sarah Topp and Brett Bricker, and a reevaluation of the basic idea of what we mean by a single topic by Sarah Spring. All three advance consideration of the topic process and provide worthy additions to the topic construction process. Because each topic experience is both somewhat unique to that subject matter and also

part of familiar patterns of argument, it is essential that we assess past practice and identify potential improvements.

Each of these contributions extends our understanding of both current practice and how topic selection can be improved. As the chair of the topic selection committee, I believe that it is important to frame these reflections within the context of recent changes to the topic selection process. I was fortunate to be able to observe the excellent work from my predecessor, Steve Mancuso, and gain an appreciation for the challenge of framing a topic that needs to withstand season-long challenges. Over the last few years, we have introduced a number of reforms including the shift of the entire topic process to until after the competition season ends, expanding the transparency with which all committee work takes place, and changing the student representative to a truly nationwide election process. Each of these efforts has made it possible for more of the community to take part in the topic selection process.

Of all of the reforms, perhaps the most significant, and one discussed at length in the following contributions, is the shift to topic controversies. As the guidelines (included as an appendix) explain, the essential rationale for debating a topic is the identification of the essential public policy controversy. Building upon the scholarship of G. Thomas Goodnight (1991), this perspective encourages topic paper submissions to assess the specific conflict that animates the need for policy reform. Instead of the historical practice of identifying the type of policy (usually either a geographic or categorical approach, such as US.-European policies or trade policy), this approach emphasizes salient political controversies.

Our contributors discuss many of the issues to be resolved within this approach. These concerns are pronounced when recent topics, such as immigration and

the democracy assistance topic, are so timely that it may create unique challenges for the research process. These concerns are also especially significant when compared to recent community voting patterns that favor narrower topic wordings. Even as legislative reforms suggest specific reforms, such as a topic rotation, each of the following contributions can encourage greater examination of how to improve the topic selection process.

References

Goodnight, G. T. (1991). Controversy. In D. W. Parson (Ed.), *Argument in controversy: Proceedings of the 7th SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation* (pp. 1-13). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

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