

Conditionality and Advocacy Status

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Understanding Status

In debate, the term “advocacy” has a specific meaning.¹ A team’s advocacy does not refer to the argument that the debaters most strongly emphasize in the round (in other words, the argument that they “advocate”). Rather, an advocacy is a proposal for action that can be adopted by an actor. During a debate round, the government team’s advocacy is their plan, whereas the opposition team’s advocacy is a counterplan or a kritik ‘alternative.’²

Opposition advocacies function differently than most other arguments. They do not demonstrate the direct costs of the plan but instead signify its opportunity costs. In other words, opposition advocacies attempt to demonstrate that an alternative and desirable path of action exists, but that this opportunity would be either foreclosed or made less valuable if the plan was adopted.

For instance, if the government plan raised the national minimum wage by 100%, the opposition side might introduce a counterplan in which individual states raised their own minimum wages to reflect the cost of living in each area. Rather than argue that the government’s plan is undesirable when evaluated against the status quo, the opposition attempts to show that the plan is less desirable than the counterplan (or any feasible combination of the two advocacies).

What is the ‘status’ of an advocacy?

The ‘status’ of an advocacy refers to the degree to which the opposition side may unilaterally remove that advocacy from the debate round. There are three

¹For a more comprehensive discussion of conditionality and status, see Merrell and Graham (2016).

²If the opposition side chooses not to propose a counterplan or kritik alternative, then by default they opt to defend the status quo.

types of status: unconditional, conditional, and dispositional.

If the status of an advocacy is “unconditional,” the opposition team must continue to advocate the position for the entire round. For example, if the opposition side introduces an unconditional counterplan, then for the remainder of the round the judge may only compare the government plan relative to the opposition counterplan.

Alternatively, if an advocacy is read “conditionally,” then the opposition team can remove the position from the debate at their discretion. In other words, the opposition may introduce a counterplan or kritik in their opening speech, but unilaterally remove that position later in the debate if they believe it is no longer strategically viable. In this case, the opposition team has the ability to shift the judge’s point of comparison multiple times: they initially ask the judge to compare the plan relative to the counterplan or kritik, but then ask the judge to compare between the plan and status quo. In even more extreme cases, the opposition team will introduce multiple conditional advocacies and ask the judge to compare the plan against any or all of them at the end of the round.

Finally, a “dispositional” advocacy is one that the opposition team may jettison if certain conditions are met during the debate. However, the list of such conditions may vary. As such, whenever a government team confronts an opponent whose advocacy is “dispositional,” the government debaters should ask their opponent to describe the set of circumstances under which the advocacy may be kicked.³

How does kicking an advocacy differ from kicking another argument?

When debaters kick a position, they do so by explaining to the judge that the argument no longer has any significance in the round and why the judge need not consider it when making a decision. The most common way for debaters to accomplish this task is to strategically concede points that are made by their opponents.

For instance, the opposition team will often “kick” a disadvantage by extending a “no link” or “no impact” argument made by the member of government. By doing so, they demonstrate that the position is no longer relevant in the round because it either does not interact with the plan or it does not result in an impact. However, the opposition debaters must be careful: although they have attempted to explain why the disadvantage is unimportant, the government side may revisit the position and argue the opposite. The opposition may, for example, have mishandled or overlooked one of the MGC’s “turns”. If so, the government may be able to return to the disadvantage and explain

³Although for the remainder of this article, we refer exclusively to “conditionality”, our arguments apply equally well to the use of dispositionality. In parli, dispositional and conditional arguments create the same set of strategic imbalances between the government and opposition.

why the judge should still consider the position before rendering a decision.

Because the negative must extend “defensive” arguments in order to “kick” out of a typical a position, and because the affirmative team has the ability to “revive” arguments that the negative side has mishandled, the government debaters can significantly influence their opponents’ behavior during the round. They may, for example, choose to make a large number of offensive arguments against a disadvantage without making any defensive claims. In this case, the opposition will face great difficulty kicking out of the disadvantage without addressing each of the arguments in turn. In short, the government can use its own arguments strategically in order to influence its opponents.

However, this type of strategic is not available to the government team when they confront a conditional advocacy. Conditionality allows the opposition side to unilaterally and absolutely remove an argument from the round. When the opposition team “kicks” a counterplan or kritik alternative, the government side cannot resurrect that position. Furthermore, the opposition does not need to answer the government’s arguments against the position. When the opposition debaters announce that they are kicking a conditional advocacy, all associated arguments instantly disappear.

Thus, conditionality allows the opposition team to seize an immediate advantage. First, they gain a time-tradeoff relative to the government. The MGC no doubt made many arguments against the opposition’s advocacy, but the member of opposition can dismiss these instantly. In so doing, the opposition also nullifies a key component of the government’s strategy: because the opposition is not required to refute arguments made against the advocacy that they “kick”, the government side is not able to influence the negative’s decision by reading offense rather than defense. Additional ways in which conditionality provides a relative advantage to the opposition team are addressed in the following sections.

Why Parity is Paramount

The preeminent assumption in debate theory is that all rounds are zero-sum. Any strategic benefits that are gained by one side necessarily come at the expense of reciprocal penalties against the other. Rules and norms of acceptable behavior are therefore enforced in order to establish a level playing field for the government and opposition. Placing either team at a significant disadvantage before the debate round begins would be unfair.

Because maintaining parity between sides is the overriding goal of debate theory, teams cannot commonly justify their employment of theoretically questionable arguments merely by explaining that such arguments are “useful” to their side. Instead, they must explain why allowing a particular tactic is necessary if their side is to successfully compete in the round or, alternatively, why they would be placed as a significant disadvantage if they were precluded from using a certain strategy.

This framework for analysis is particularly pertinent in the case of conditionality. When teams argue in favor of conditionality, they often argue that the tactic is “helpful” to the negative or “fun” for opposition debaters. Rather than settle upon a single strategy, the opposition side can throw a variety of advocacies against the wall and see what sticks. However, this type of rationale is both insufficient and logically flawed. It glosses over the fact that any strategic benefits that are given to the opposition result in equivalent harms against the government side. Put simply, if conditionality makes it easier for the opposition to win, then it makes the debate more difficult for the affirmative.

As such, in order to justify their use of conditionality, the opposition team must demonstrate that two arguments are true. First, conditionality is necessary to establish parity between the two sides in the debate: absent conditionality, the opposition would be at a significant competitive disadvantage relative to the government. Second, conditionality does not lead to an over-correction in which the opposition now gains a competitive advantage relative to the government.

The first of these arguments is easily dismissed. Unlike policy debate, parliamentary debate does not suffer from a systematic government bias. If anything, the opposition side is awarded ballots at a disproportionately high rate. Furthermore, many squads have enjoyed significant success without resorting to conditionality. In short, there is very little reason to believe that the opposition side is unable to compete on equal footing without conditionality.⁴ This argument alone should be sufficient reason for judges to reject teams who use conditional or dispositional advocacies: because the argument is unjustified from the perspective of necessity, any risk that it creates a bias against the government should be a sufficient reason to reject the strategy.

However, for those who remain unconvinced, the majority of this article focuses on the latter of the two claims that are made to support conditionality: that the strategy does not over-bias the debate in favor of the opposition. In the following sections, we argue that such claims are incorrect, and that conditionality – when used strategically – creates an unacceptable bias against the government team. Furthermore, we address a third argument that opposition teams often make: that conditionality improves the overall quality of debate. In contrast to supporters of conditionality, we find that conditional advocacies actually impede strategic thinking and reduce the quality of education to which debaters have access within rounds.

⁴For more on the issue of conditionality and how it affects side bias in policy vs. parli, see Merrell and Graham (2016).

The Effects of Conditionality on Side Bias

Although the issue remains contentious, conditionality is generally accepted in policy debate, where the affirmative side enjoys a significant competitive advantage relative to the negative. In that activity, conditional arguments are viewed as a useful mechanism that allows the negative to compete successfully against an otherwise dominant affirmative. The same imbalance, however, does not exist in parliamentary debate. If anything, the opposite is true. In *parli*, the opposition side enjoys a favorable strategic position relative to the government. Rather than remedying an imbalance, conditionality actually serves to further an existing bias, creating an even larger imbalance in favor of the opposition.

There are three primary ways in which conditionality skews the strategic balance of the round toward the opposition. First, conditionality allows the opposition to propose multiple advocacies and to selectively choose between those advocacies based on what the affirmative team answers poorly. Second, conditionality allows the opposition to jettison advocacies and associated arguments without answering the government's responses to those positions, thereby nullifying the government team's offense and decreasing clash. Finally, conditionality allows the opposition side to read inconsistent and contradictory arguments, thereby placing the government in a double-bind: in order to answer one advocacy, the affirmative must link themselves harder to the alternative advocacy.

The harms that are associated with each of those distortions are exacerbated in parliamentary debate relative to policy. In parliamentary debate there are narrower resolutions, harsher limits on pre-round preparation, stricter limits on the use of in-round evidence or prepared materials, and reduced opportunities to ask clarifying questions. Collectively, these differences between the two events make conditionality a much more potent tactic in *parli* than in policy and create unacceptable biases in favor of the opposition side.

First, *parli*'s narrow resolutions and strict limits on pre-round prep time make conditionality particularly powerful in parliamentary debate. Resolutions often require the government team to enact a particular policy; as such, the government is unable to tailor its plan to avoid or hedge against potential opposition advocacies.

Similarly, the debaters on the government side lack an opportunity to familiarize with their own plan. In policy the affirmative team consistently knows more about their advocacy and the issues that relate to it than do their opponents. As such, the affirmative is able to leverage its plan and advantages against negative arguments. In parliamentary debate, however, limited prep time and narrow resolutions flip the informational asymmetry in favor of the opposition. If the resolution is sufficiently narrow, both sides are able to predict the likely affirmative plan. The opposition need only select a single strategy or counter-advocacy to leverage against that plan; thereafter, they

can focus on that argument for the remainder of prep time. The government team, in contrast, must develop the affirmative case and also prepare against every potential negative strategy. Government frontlines against opposition positions are often shallow, and members of government are poorly informed about opposition arguments. These factors heavily constrain the government side's ability to competently rebut opposition advocacies. The problem is further exacerbated when the opposition is able to read advocacies conditionally because such advocacies need no longer be consistent with one another.

Pressure on the MGC is further complicated by the lack of blocks, in-round prep time, or opportunities to raise clarifying questions. Without blocks or prep time, it is much, it is much easier for a member of government to make a mistake or to accidentally present arguments that contradict with either one another or the affirmative plan. In short, it is much more difficult to deliver a strategic and coherent MG against a variety of conditional advocacies in *parli* than in *policy*. To make matters worse, *parli* teams are often only allowed to ask one – and at most a few – questions of their opponents. They therefore lack a guaranteed opportunity to clarify the status of each advocacy, ask how different arguments function as net-benefits for each advocacy, understand the details of how each advocacy would function, etc. Nor can parliamentary debaters read an opponent's evidence during in-round prep time if they need clarification; the rules prohibit such behaviors. Overall, the rules against the use of prepared materials during rounds as well as the structural barriers that impede clarification make it much harder for the MGC to correctly understand and coherently answer conditional advocacies in *parli* than in *policy*.

Supporters of conditionality offer two counterarguments. First, they assert that conditionality is “key to negative ground.” This claim, however, is without merit. Opposition teams can and do succeed without resorting to conditionality. In addition, ground for each side is determined by the resolution, not by the set of tactics that are available. The capacity to read advocacies conditionally does not shift the range of argumentative ground to which either side has access: every argument that can be made conditionally could also be made unconditionally. Conditionality merely allows the opposition to advance multiple advocacies simultaneously. Requiring that advocacies be presented unconditionally only reinforces an inherent expectation of debate: the opposition side should carefully select its LOC strategy. Asking the opposition team to choose between advocacies before the LOC is no more heinous a request than setting time limits on speeches. In both cases, the opposition side may envision more arguments during prep time than they have an opportunity to present during the debate itself. Forcing them to choose selecting among those options merely sets a premium on strategic thinking and improves education.

Second, opposition teams often claim that forcing them to defend an advocacy even after it has been proven undesirable would somehow constitute abuse. However, this complaint would be nonsensical in all other debate contexts. The opposition could hardly ask a judge to disregard an impact scenario

or a disadvantage simply because their opponents had turned it against them. Instead, they should learn from the experience and select their strategy more carefully in future rounds. Strategically presenting and defending arguments is central to debate.

Conditionality and the Quality of Debate

The fact that conditionality heavily biases the debate in favor of the opposition should be sufficient reason for judges to disregard and for responsible teams to eschew the strategy. However, we make an additional set of arguments: conditional advocacies decrease the overall quality of debate by distracting from substantive education, decreasing the overall depth of analysis in debate rounds, and minimizing the opposition side's strategic thinking.

First, conditionality decreases substantive education in debate rounds by encouraging government teams to read theory arguments against opposing advocacies. Status-related theory is the only offense to which government teams are guaranteed stable access throughout the debate. Furthermore, because the opposition has an incentive to collapse to the argument that the government side under-covered relative to other positions, the opposition is more likely to be ahead on substantive issues than if they presented an advocacy unconditionally. In sum, the PMR has a greater incentive to focus the rebuttal on theory rather than substance.

Second, conditionality reduces the depth of analysis that occurs in debate rounds. In parliamentary debate, where topics rotate every round, breadth of education is guaranteed. However, depth of analysis on a specific issue is only possible when teams select a single LOC advocacy, present it in detail, and allow the remaining speeches to evaluate the relative benefits of that advocacy and the plan. Conditionality, however, provides the opposition side with an incentive to read multiple inconsistent arguments in order to split the government side's responses. Because speeches are divided across multiple sets of advocacies, depth of analysis is reduced. Even Roger Solt (2003), an advocate of limited forms of conditionality in policy debate, concedes that "two policy alternatives can't be exhaustively evaluated [within the context of a debate round]? it is therefore best to force each team to do its own 'scan' of available policy options, select one and debate it to the maximum depth possible." The best way to facilitate depth of analysis in parliamentary debate is for the LOC to focus on a single advocacy and for the MO and LOR to defend that advocacy against a series of government counterattacks.

Third, conditionality allows the opposition team to sidestep strategic adaptation and delay strategic thinking. Parliamentary debaters should adapt their strategies while listening to the government case. A successful opposition team will listen to the opening government speech, decide whether introducing a particular advocacy would make strategic sense, and will ultimately select among the various options at their disposal. This type of strategic planning and ar-

gumentative adaptation is only encouraged when the opposition is held to a single strategy. Conditionality, by contrast, encourages the opposition to run a large number of advocacies that are not well tailored to the affirmative case and then kick whichever positions are least successful. This reduces strategic decision-making to a simple matter of “going for what the government dropped,” thereby encouraging cheap-shot debating where speaking as quickly as possible in order to prevent coverage by one’s opponents is the best inroad to the judge’s ballot.

Advocates of conditionality attempt to refute these arguments regarding the quality of debate on several grounds. First, they claim that conditionality facilitates strategic thinking by both the government and opposition. However, as we argue above, conditionality actually decreases the strategic tools that are at the government’s disposal by preventing teams from using straight-turns and offense to compensate for opposition time tradeoffs or to influence the opposition’s strategic collapse. Likewise, allowing the opposition side to jettison their advocacies attenuates the importance of pre-round prep time. In a crunch, opposition teams will simply select two contradictory advocacies and then pursue in the block whichever advocacy was answered most poorly by the MGC.

Second, proponents of conditionality argue that conditionality is the most real world approach to policymaking. Such claims, however, are inapplicable to debate, where the preservation of fairness between sides should take precedence over a search for the best policy. Limits of pre-round preparation, the lack of printed materials in round, and even fundamental requirements such as topicality and time limits prevent debaters from identifying ideal policies but are considered important aspects of the activity for other reasons. Real-world policymakers do not operate in an oppositional format where the preservation of competitive equity is paramount. Furthermore, debaters do not seek to pursue optimal policies during rounds; instead, they advocate and select the arguments that their opponents mishandle.

Finally, some argue that conditional increases argumentative creativity and reduces the degree to which opposition teams propose generic advocacies. However, this argument is backward: generic counterplans and kritiks are currently useful in parliamentary debate because government teams persist in answering them poorly. However, as teams become more adept at answering generic counterplans and kritiks, opposition teams will be less apt to read such arguments unconditionally lest their opponents respond successfully. In his assessment of conditionality in policy debate, Aaron Hardy (2010) argued that giving the debaters “carte blanche to introduce as many [advocacies] as time permits in each debate creates a number of drawbacks. It fosters a debate curriculum which discourages on-point research in favor of generically applicable argumentation? it also discourages the development of in-round strategic thinking skills which require seeing interactions and synthesis between multiple different positions.” On balance, conditionality results in a trend in favor of generic argumentation

and impedes the development of strategic skills, thereby reducing the value of debate as an educational tool.

Conclusion

Structural distinctions between parliamentary and policy exacerbate the harms of conditionality in the latter event, both in terms of the strategic imbalance that the strategy creates and its potential to erode the overall quality of debate.

Given these concerns, judges should consider setting aside prevailing attitudes against intervention and should instead stipulate that they will not tolerate conditional arguments in much the same way that they reject harassment. Similarly, coaches and teams should forgo their pursuit of competitive advantages by confining themselves and their teams to unconditional advocacies in the interests of the activity as a whole. At the very least, all teams should recognize the importance of teaching teams to competently argue that conditionality is bad.

References

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