

A Coach’s Notes: Middle School Edition¹

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Introduction

This is a bonus addition of my notes. The Connecticut Middle School Debate League (CTMSDL) used the CDA October 2023 motion for their December tournament. The final round was excellent,, and raised similar issues—in a slightly different way—than the high school final at Joel Barlow. The notes below should be considered a companion to those for the final round at Joel Barlow. All of these can be found through the [Training Material](#) page on the CDA website with the packets, flows and notes for 2023-24.

I have transcribed my notes from the debate. They are in two forms, a linear flow in the order in which the arguments were presented and a tabular flow which looks like my actual page of notes. They can be found on the website with this document.

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CTMSDL Final Round RFD, Smith Middle School, December 16 2023

This House would set maximum age limits for elected office.

Prop: Bethel, Akhil Sharma and Bhuvan Dasari

Opp: Bethel, Aarna Doshi, Trisha Sharma, and Radha Sinha

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RFD

I did not judge the final round at Smith, but I did flow it carefully. The material below provides some background as to what issues a judge should consider in a debate like this one. What follows is how I would have arrived at a vote in favor of Opposition.

The table below provides a brief outline of the cases presented by each side. A transcript of my flow is available with this document on the CDA website as noted above.

Proposition case outline	Opposition case outline
Plan: Implement an age limit for political office	Counterplan: Mandatory annual physical and cognitive health testing as a qualification for office
P1: The old have more health issues than the young	O1: Senior citizens have more experience and expertise
P2: The young can't make their voice heard when older politicians stay in office	O2: Age limits result in neglecting the ability of older citizens
P3: Age limits are popular with Americans	

The Opposition counterplan is not mutually exclusive with the Proposition plan. This means that both the Prop plan and the Opp counterplan could both be implemented at the same time. Both have unique benefits, as age limits open positions for younger representation and health testing limits the risk of impairment at all ages. Hence “doing both” is probably better than doing either alone. “Doing both” includes adopting the motion which means a judge should vote for Prop. Had the Prop Second Speaker raised this point in their speech, I likely would have voted Prop.

(Below I discuss counterplan theory in detail.)

But a debate should be judged on the arguments presented by the debaters, not the arguments the judge would have preferred.

The Prop First Speaker identifies two issues solved by adopting the motion: the risks of age-related performance decline, and the over-emphasis in politics of old voices over young. The Opp First Speaker raises a third issue, age discrimination, which is a direct consequence of a maximum age limit, as well as presenting the counterplan.

On performance, Opp notes that health assessments not only deal with the risks introduced by age, but also similar risks that affect the young. Prop does not contest this other than to note health-related problems are more likely with age.

On representation, Opp notes that the young vote, and can express their preference that way. While Gov argues many elected politicians are older and cites sources saying the young feel they are not well represented, Opp notes that the young regularly vote for older politicians, for example Bernie Sanders (in the second Opp constructive) and John Fetterman (in the Opp rebuttal).

The representation issue also has to be balanced against Opp's point on age discrimination. Even if adopting the motion increases the influence of the young, it clearly decreases the influence of the old. Opp also notes, and at one point Prop agrees, that knowledge and experience increases with age, so there is an impact on the effectiveness of government in addition to the discrimination.

Most of Prop's replies do not really engage the Opp arguments. They provide additional evidence that some older politicians should not be in office, and that this concerns many voters. But Prop never addresses the counterplan, either by arguing it would not be effective or would have disadvantages that an age limit does not have.

In the end, both teams solve age-related health issues, but Opp also solves these among the young. Representation is at best a wash, with any gains in representation among the young balanced by losses among the old. Opp clearly wins on age discrimination and establishes that excluding older politicians results in a loss of experience and expertise. On balance, a clear Opp win.

There are strong arguments that Prop could have raised against competency testing: what should be tested? who should do the testing? and who decides when a person is disqualified? In today's highly partisan political climate, it seems unlikely the two parties could agree on a neutral process. Both parties would have an incentive to either cheat or appeal any decisions through the courts. But that would be a different debate.

Counterplans

Whenever a Proposition team hears the Opposition team talk about "our (the Opposition's) plan", Prop should immediately look for answers to two questions: Is the Opposition plan "competitive"? Does the Opposition plan "solve"?

A policy motion is one that proposes—and the Proposition team must defend—a change in the status quo, the way things are now. Prop may simply defend the motion as written or may elaborate on its implementation in the form of a plan. At that point the debate offers the Judges a choice between the motion as interpreted by the Prop plan and the status quo. In most debates Opp will defend the status quo by arguing either that the problem Prop is trying to solve isn't a significant problem, or the problem isn't fixed by the plan, or that the plan has disadvantages that outweigh any benefits.

If Opp agrees the status quo is flawed, they may choose not to defend it by offering an alternative change to the status quo, a "counterplan". The debate then becomes one between the world that would exist if the Prop plan were adopted, and the world that would exist if the Opp counterplan were adopted. If you were to use the "two worlds" approach to weighing the debate in your rebuttal speech, in a round without an Opposition counterplan the worlds would be the world of the plan and the world of the status quo. With a counterplan, the two worlds would be the world of the plan and the world of the counterplan, as both sides agree the status quo is flawed.

Limits on Plans and Counterplans

In a debate, the motion limits what the Prop team can do in their plan. For example, this motion limits Prop to setting an age limit for officeholders. Prop could not, for example, include a plan provision to add competency testing for younger politicians, or one to change the size of the Supreme Court, or one to increase spending on welfare programs, even though each of these might be good things to do.

For the debate to be fair, there need to be reasonable limits on what the Opp can include in their counterplan. The primary limits on an Opp counterplan are: (1) that it be “competitive” or “mutually exclusive” with the motion as interpreted by the Prop plan²; and, (2) that it “solve” for the Prop advantages.

I want to emphasize that these are not “rules” in the sense that Prop can stand up and say, “the Opp counterplan breaks the rule on competitiveness or solvency, so we win.” Rather, if the Opp counterplan doesn’t meet these criteria, it provides grounds for arguments that can (usually) be used by Prop to convince the judge to vote in their favor. Nor is this automatic. Prop has to make those arguments by explaining them to the judge and defending them against any Opp reply. In the final round at Smith, Prop could have made the arguments discussed below but did not.

Competition or Mutual Exclusion

A counterplan is “competitive” or “mutually exclusive” with the plan if both the plan and the counterplan cannot be done simultaneously. For example, suppose the motion proposed moving the US to a national health care system like the UK or Canada. A counterplan providing sufficient funds for all citizens to buy private health insurance is mutually exclusive, as the two programs are in conflict: national healthcare would replace all private health insurance.

Why is it important that a counterplan be mutually exclusive? Remember Prop is limited by the motion. If Opp were not similarly limited, then in any debate they could say, “our counterplan is to implement the Prop plan and buy everyone a new car”. It sounds absurd, but clearly this counterplan achieves everything Prop claims the plan does and arguably has the additional benefit of new cars (make mine a Porsche, please). Unless the motion is about automobiles, Prop could never match it. This type of strategy would always be a winning one for Opp against almost any motion and Prop plan.

Beyond fairness, a counterplan that is not competitive fails to meet the objective of the Opposition in the debate. Prop’s job is to persuade the judge that the motion should be adopted; Opp’s job is to persuade the judge that it should not be adopted. In the example above, Opp is arguing to adopt the motion plus a bit more. All Prop needs is agreement to adopt the motion; the “bit more” doesn’t matter. In this example, Prop and Opp both want the motion to be adopted, so judge should vote for Prop.

² Counterplan theory gets very complicated, and not everyone agrees with the limits or how to justify them. The concepts of competitiveness and mutual exclusion are enough for CDA and CTMSDL.

More generally, if the plan and the counterplan do not compete—in other words, they could both be executed simultaneously—there are now three options to choose from: do the plan alone; do the counterplan alone; or do both! Prop and Opp have agreed the status quo is not a good choice. Prop has advanced a plan, Opp a counterplan. If the best option is to implement both the plan and the counterplan—and there is no reason they both can't be done together—both should be adopted. Prop has met its obligation; Opp has not.

In the final round at Smith, the plan follows the motion by limiting the maximum age for elected officials to some reasonable age, giving as examples limits for other occupations like pilots and police officers. The counterplan is to implement a physical and mental health assessment for anyone running for or in office. Obviously you can have both an age limit and regular health evaluations: this is already the case for pilots and police. The counterplan is not mutually exclusive with the plan.

This would have been a winning argument for Prop: let's have both age limits and health assessments. However, Prop never makes this argument, so I believe the RFD above is justified.

Solvency

In addition to being competitive, the counterplan should solve the harms Prop has identified in the status quo and/or achieve comparable benefits. In proposing a counterplan, Opp rejects the status quo, as does Prop. The requirement that the counterplan be mutually exclusive with the plan prevents Opp from doing things Prop might also do if Prop were not limited by the motion. The requirement that Opp solve the same or comparable problems to those identified by Prop prevents Opp from drifting off to matters unrelated to the motion (like buying cars so people don't have to walk). Together these limits will typically result in a fair debate where Prop and Opp clash on the same issues.

Assuming the counterplan is competitive, this does not mean the counterplan achieves everything the plan does, in the same time frame or to the same degree. The two worlds will differ in their impacts good and bad. The winning team will have to show that the benefits of their side—plan or counterplan—outweigh those of the other side.

Again, suppose for example that the motion is for the US to adopt a national healthcare program like the UK or Canada. Opp's counterplan is to provide sufficient funds for individuals to buy private health insurance. The counterplan is competitive as national healthcare replaces private health insurance. Both the plan and the counterplan provide healthcare to all citizens. In the debate. The teams will have to compare and contrast a government-run program to one managed through competing private insurers on the basis of things like overall cost, administrative complexity, personal preference, etc.

Turning back to the final round at Smith, Prop argues the plan, age limits for politicians, provides two benefits: preventing older health-impaired leaders and opening offices for younger politicians. Opp argues their counterplan, regular health evaluations, prevents health impaired leaders at all ages and avoids the plan disadvantage of age discrimination. As neither side

brings up the issue of competitiveness, the round is decided based on how the two teams present, defend, and weigh those issues, again as explained in the RFD.

Alternatives to Counterplans

The analysis above suggests counterplans are complicated. Many debaters and judges either don't know or don't fully understand the plan/counterplan issues of competition/mutual exclusion and solvency. For that reason, I don't recommend using counterplans in most situations, especially if the same result can be achieved more simply.

Even competitive counterplans only win on their advantages and disadvantages compared to the Prop plan. Often Opp teams can present the same advantages and disadvantages without using the counterplan. This depends on the motion, the Prop case, and a debater's knowledge of the topic. It isn't a simple matter of applying some abstract theory about arguments.

In the final round at Smith, Opp's two contentions don't depend on the counterplan that Opp presents. Rather, they are disadvantages to the plan. The Prop age limits discriminate against older Americans and deprive the country of the benefit of their experience and expertise as working politicians. Opp only uses the counterplan to cite an additional advantage of dealing with health issues in younger politicians, a minor benefit at best.

Instead of proposing the counterplan, Opp could have noted that most adults already get regular physicals. Politicians are regularly scrutinized by their staff, other politicians, their opponents, the press, and the public. Those faced with health issues often resign on their own, are pressured to resign, or lose the election because voters care about competence. The examples of politicians continuing despite obvious incapacity, such as Diane Feinstein, are relatively rare. This status quo mechanism applies to all politicians, regardless of age. This line of reasoning allows Opp to argue the problem of health-impaired older politicians is small in comparison to the harms of age discrimination and loss of experience and expertise.

In fact, this is much how this final round played out! The counterplan was not essential to the Opp line of argument. The debate was largely decided without reference to it.

I am not saying that counterplans should never be used. I provided the example of a motion advocating universal government health insurance because in this case a counter plan funding private health insurance is a good one. But often a counterplan adds unnecessary complexity and risk being misunderstood. If your Opp contentions don't rely on the counterplan, the counterplan is not needed. If you can show the status quo already has ways of dealing with the problem Prop identifies, a counterplan is not needed.

Would vs. Should

Unrelated to the discussion about counterplans, a Coach brought a question to Tab about the meaning of the term "would" in the motion. Does this mean that the Proposition team must show that "This House", however defined is actually likely to—would—implement the motion?

Or, conversely, does this mean that Opp can argue the motion should be rejected because, in the real world, “This House” is unlikely to implement the motion?

The question may have arisen from the conventions of the Policy/Cross-ex and Public Forum debate formats, where the topic is always phrased as “Resolved: someone should do something.” The word “should” is usually interpreted such that the Affirmative or Proposition team need only show the benefits of implementing the resolution outweigh those of not implementing it. Aff/Prop does not have the burden of showing adoption is likely. Most debate texts and coaches teach that this is an important distinction.

Parliamentary debate comes out of a different tradition, based on the conventions of the British Parliament and the debating societies at British universities like Oxford and Cambridge. “This House would...” is a traditional phrasing for a question before the House. The speakers rise in favor or against adoption. The topics are usually policies the debating societies cannot implement, but the members vote at the end of the debate for or against based on the speakers’ arguments.

“Would” is a “term of art” in Parliamentary debate that is interpreted according to the conventions of the event, and not according to a literal meaning or a meaning taken from other activities. In a motion, “would” is the same as “should” in Policy or Public Forum. Proposition, Government, or Affirmative (whichever convention you prefer) need not show the agent in the real world is likely to adopt, only that it is preferable that they do so.

However, in all forms of debate, “should” or “This House would” does not prevent Opposition or Negative (whichever you prefer) from raising what is known as a “politics disadvantage”. Implementing the motion or resolution will likely affect some groups differently than others. Those harmed may react badly, and those reactions may reduce or overwhelm any benefits from the plan.

For example, in this tournament’s motion, Prop does not have to show that the US will implement age limits. Nor is it reasonable for Opp to argue the motion should be rejected because all those old people in Congress will never implement them. However, Opp can raise the disadvantage that older voters may resent older politicians being discriminated against in this way. In addition to age discrimination being a rights violation and a harm in itself, Opp might argue that older voters would retaliate by voting against programs that benefit the young, such as money for education, and in favor of programs that benefit themselves like Social Security and Medicare. This is a reasonable consequence of age limits and there are reasonable arguments Prop can bring in reply, so such arguments are admissible.

More broadly, the “should/would” question is one of “what do we want the debate to be about?” In setting the motion for this tournament, the intention was that debaters argue the advantages and disadvantages of age limits for politicians. Do we really want them to be arguing whether and which of 100 Senators or 435 Representatives would vote to implement

them? If the latter, then every debate would be about the same thing, whether the motion would pass, rather than the merits of the motion itself.

Rules or Guidelines?

The discussion above is \not about citing rules, but about making arguments. Debaters should understand the reasoning behind counterplans, competitiveness/mutual exclusion, solvency, should/would, and any other “rule” a coach, teacher or debater may refer to. Telling a judge the other team broke the rules isn’t going to win you the debate if the judge isn’t aware of the rule or has been told a different rule.

Better whenever you hear “rule” think “guideline”. Be prepared to explain why your interpretation is the best course of action. Persuade the judge with reasoned arguments, like those above. That’s how you win debates.