

A Coach's Notes¹

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THW (This House would) set maximum age limits for elected office.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the October 7, 2023, CDA tournament and topic. Previous year's editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site.

Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Joel Barlow presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. If you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Controlling the Framework

Most debaters use the word "framework" to indicate the voting criteria or standard they want used to judge the impact of the arguments in the round. I prefer to use it to identify the broader yet central question, "What is the debate about?" The answer to that question encompasses the motion, any definitions, the interpretation of the motion (which may or may not include a plan and/or counterplan), and the decision criteria, all as offered by the Prime Minister and possibly contested by Opp. Another term debaters use for all of this is "top of case" because it usually comes before any substantive arguments for or against

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either side. While “top of case” is a good reminder that discussion of these items belongs at the beginning of any speech, I think “framework” better describes their purpose.

My thinking has been influenced by a variety of debaters writing about the World Schools and British Parliamentary debate formats. These are similar in style to the American Parliament Debate Association format the CDA has adopted, even if the speaker roles and timings are a bit different. These writers emphasize two things: finding a central issue and comparing alternatives.

Finding a Central Issue

Several writers recommend debaters identify one—and only one—central issue and build their case around it. That may not be possible with every motion, but since I have been sensitized to that idea, I see its benefits in more debates and in constructing motions for tournaments.

For this month’s motion, I would identify the central issue as, “What is the best way to deal with age-related decline—something we will all face if we live long enough—in our elected officials?” Obvious perhaps, but interestingly, no one actually said this in the final round at Joel Barlow.

This isn’t quite complete because it lacks any explicit comparisons, only the teaser “best way to deal with” which is undefined. This is where debaters tend to specify voting criteria. In the final round at Joel Barlow Gov offered “what is best for the future of the country” and Opp offered “what leads to broad and accurate representation of the voters”. Opp is a bit more specific than Gov, but do either of these really clarify anything?

Suppose Gov goes on to say that societies have used three ways to deal with age: do nothing, that is let the elected officials choose when to retire and the voters choose whom to vote for; age limits, as mandatory retirement ages are common in many occupations; and competency evaluations of mental and physical health, also common. There may be other options, but I can’t think of them. These cover the issue best as I can tell.

Putting this all together, Gov’s “framework” could be something like this:

Good day. My partner and I support the motion, This House would set maximum age limits for elected office.

By way of definitions, I think it is clear that we are talking about a country with a functioning liberal democracy and deciding the rules that should apply to candidates running for office. “Maximum age limits” would be similar to a mandatory retirement age and would be set the same way and possibly change over time as overall health changes.

We believe the central issue in today’s debate is “what is the best way to deal with age-related decline—something we will all face if we live long enough—in our elected officials.”

There are three approaches to this problem. The first, the status quo, is to let nature take its course, with politicians deciding when to step down and voters deciding whether to elect or re-elect them. The second, which we advocate, are age limits, with mandatory retirement ages common in the economy. The third is mental and physical competency evaluations, which are less common.

Our position in today's debate is that age limits are the best way to deal with the risks of age-related decline in elected officials.

Our contentions are...

This is probably very different from the top-of-case you usually present or see. Try reading it out loud. It takes about one minute, leaving 6 minutes for constructive argument. The definitions are minimal because in this case it is likely the audience and opponents know what we are talking about. If Opp wants to quibble about some detail like what the specific age limit should be, let them bring it up, as it will be easy to reply.

There don't appear to be any voting criteria other than "best way to deal" which I criticize above as being vague. But in fact there are, and the voting criteria lie in the three options offered. Gov indicates it will present a case supporting one alternative, specified in the motion for dealing with the risks of age-related decline. The judge should vote for Gov if they show maximum age limits are superior to the other two methods. Gov's case likely will offer several dimensions on which maximum age limits are superior to the status quo and competency exams. Gov may use different dimensions depending on which alternatives are being compared.

Importantly we know exactly what the debate will be about and how it should be decided. The only question is whether Opp will accept the debate as offered or present an alternative.

Stealing Framework

My advice to Opp is, when offered a fair debate, accept it. Here Opp has two good options, the status quo and a possible counterplan in competency testing. Opp could even note that most of us get regular medical care, and the results, if not fully public, are often known to family, close aides, and friends, who are likely to provide advice and pressure, and can be a source of leaks. There are good arguments in favor of all three options.

I would describe Opp's approach in the final round at Joel Barlow to be an attempt to steal the framework away from Gov. They said the debate should be judged on how well the elected officials represent their constituents. Implicitly, from the arguments presented, they meant elected officials should match the demographics of their constituents. This allows them to introduce a counterplan, compulsory voting, which is only tangentially related to the motion. (For more details see the RFD below.)

Stealing the framework can be a very effective way to win a round. Done properly it can allow Opp to dismiss much of Gov's offense. To do so, Opp must show that its new

framework is superior in some way, ideally because the Gov framework is a flawed interpretation of the motion.

For example, I saw a debate a number of years ago on the motion that students at Hogwarts should be assigned to their houses randomly, rather than by the Sorting Hat². Gov said the two sides should be measured by their impact on education, and explained that randomness would lead to diversity, whereas the Sorting Hat grouped students by similar characteristics, for example placing troublemakers in Slytherin, heroes in Gryffindor, and so forth. Opp accepted this framework! Think about it. Gov is defending diversity, Opp is defending—or trying to defend—segregation. It should be obvious that is—and was—a losing strategy.

Alternatively, Opp could have noted that the issue under discussion is the same one faced by the admissions departments of every major university: what is the best way to create a diversified student body. Gov has already accepted diversity as best for education. Opp should reply that diversity is better achieved by consciously considering the characteristics of each individual student. This is what admissions departments do, and arguably what the Sorting Hat does.³ Opp doesn't necessarily win this debate, but it is on much better ground defending an alternative to achieving diversity than it is defending segregation. And since the Gov contentions were essentially “diversity is good” rather than random selection is the best way to achieve diversity, Opp can claim all of Gov's offense. This leaves Gov not only to start over, but actually behind as they have to meet Opp's arguments on why conscious choice is better than random selection.

Seen this way, framework is not about definitions, but about arguments: which ones apply and why some are better than others. The question, “what is this debate about” is not quibbling over the meaning of words, but over the importance of issues.

Maintaining Control

I don't think Opp's alternative at Joel Barlow was effective. While representing constituents is an admirable goal, it is not obviously superior to competency. In fact the two goals are largely unrelated, even complementary as the counterplan analysis below shows. Opp made no attempt to explain why its framework was superior or that the Gov framework was incorrect or unfair.

In relation to the Gov framework presented above, Opp's representation framework fares even worse. By outlining the obvious (and likely complete set of) alternatives, Opp's arguments seem even less relevant to the issue at hand. Gov can easily make the “do both” response to the counterplan. While representation is a legitimate goal, Opp has presented nothing to show Gov's is not the best approach to the issue of competency. A

² Knowledge is the “gold coin” of debate. If you are unfamiliar with the Harry Potter series, my apologies.

³ All we know about the Sorting Hat from the books and movies is that it considers both the characteristics and wishes of each student, not how it uses that information to place them. The characterizations of the various houses is only an impression one might get from the very few students we meet.

vote for Gov is warranted regardless of any opinion on representation or the counterplan's ability to achieve it.

Gov's goal should be to have a debate on the grounds they choose in order to maintain control of the arguments. For that to happen they need to offer Opp a fair debate. The best way to do this is to outline the options from the start. If Opp accepts, game on. If Opp does not accept but the offer was fair, Opp has a much higher burden to meet to justify rejection and support their alternative. Either way, the Prime Minister has clearly outlined the scope of the debate to all present, and clarity usually works in favor of the team that provides it.

Final Round at Joel Barlow

(This is an edited version of my RFD for the round. See the accompanying flow for round details. It repeats some of the issues discussed above, but I think it is useful for debaters to see the process of evaluation used in deciding the round.)

While there are no rules of debate—and even that rule isn't a rule because there are strict rules regarding order and timing of speeches—there are many guidelines that it would be foolish for debaters to ignore.

First, Opp introduces a counterplan, though they never call it that, and only after presenting two contentions that have no clear connection to the motion or the Gov case. If Opp is going to go the counterplan route, it should be introduced at the top of LOC, immediately after any opening comments, definitions, or framework. Introducing a counterplan signals that Opp wants the debate to be a contest between the motion as interpreted by the Gov and the counterplan, rather than between Gov's interpretation of the motion and the status quo.

Why should Opp introduce the counterplan at the top of the LOC? Unless it does, the audience—judge, opposing team, audience—won't know what Opp is trying to do. In this round the framework argument and the two contentions Opp presents before the counterplan only make sense if you know the counterplan. In spoken argument you must lead your listeners on carefully: you may know where you are trying to go, but they don't.

To win, the counterplan must do two things: solve the problems identified by the Gov better than the Gov plan; and be competitive (or mutually exclusive) in the sense that the two options, plan and counterplan, cannot both be done, or, if done together, would be significantly worse than the counterplan alone. When a counterplan is presented, the judge has three options: vote for the plan, vote for the counterplan, or vote for both. Opp only wins if the judge votes for the counterplan alone, as the other two options are a vote for the Gov case and this should mean a win for Gov. This is standard counterplan theory.

Here, the counterplan, compulsory voting, and the plan, age limits, can both be implemented without conflict. Gov (finally!) explains this at the beginning of the PMR.

That leads to the second guideline violated here, no new arguments in rebuttal (while technically a rule, really a guideline since it is often hard to decide what is a new argument). The fact that the counterplan is not mutually exclusive should have been the first thing said in the MGC. Presented for the first time in the PMR, it is a new argument in rebuttal. However, it was not called as such by a point of order from the Opposition.

Opp also had a new argument in the LOR that went unnoticed by Gov: that it isn't the age of the candidates but the age of the voters choosing them that matters. This extended the Opp answer to their own question, "Will compulsory voting work?", near the beginning of the LOR, and used the example of the enthusiasm of young voters for Bernie Sanders. Gov matched them with another new argument at the end of the PMR, when they asked and answered the question, "Which side stays true to the American philosophy of government?", noting minimum age limits exist in the Constitution, while compulsory voting does not.

So, what is a judge to do? Incomplete arguments force a judge to use their own discretion in weighing their importance. But how much discretion is appropriate?

Had the MG stood and said, "Do both!", for me the debate would have been over then and there with a Gov win. It was finally said in the PMR, new, but not called as such, and both sides had other new arguments in rebuttal also not called. This gives me a reason to vote Gov, but not one I really like.

Both sides give me vague weighing mechanisms, "what is best for the future of the country" from Gov, and "elected officials who accurately represent their constituents" from Opp. Neither side tells me how to measure their achievement.

The case Gov presents is that younger politicians are better than older ones for the future of the country. Gov stays closer to this theme throughout the round, focusing on competency and cognitive decline in the PMR. (But giving no shout out at all to their second and third contentions on diversity and power!)

Opp never argues that age limits won't fix the competency problems. Opp also never answers when Gov explains that compulsory voting does not prevent the election of older politicians who may suffer decline after election. (Gov could have pointed to Bernie Sanders' age, and young people voting for him, a gift from Opp that Gov did not choose to accept.)

Opp's case interprets their framework as "you need politicians who match the characteristics of those who vote for them". They merely imply but never give strong reasons why younger voters won't vote for older politicians. They contradict their own case with the Bernie Sanders example. They never reply to Gov's "correlation not causation" and list of arguments as to why many choose not to vote. Finally, they never respond to the Gov's argument that there are many differences between the political systems of the US and Australia—Opp's primary example—that might explain the age differences in elected officials in the two countries.

(Note there are a lot of other problems with Opp’s counterplan/framework Gov could have mentioned but didn’t. Why stop with age? Why not also gender, race, creed, etc.? And how do you achieve that with electoral districts that are various mixtures of a variety of possibly important demographic characteristics? This is an entirely different debate, but by raising these points Gov could have strengthened the argument that Opp is really going off on a tangent to the topic at hand.)

At the end I have one decisive argument for Gov that I am uncomfortable voting on, a fairly clear Gov win on competency, and fairly solid Gov response to Opp’s claims regarding compulsory voting. I can vote Gov with a clear conscience.

You might say that I am ignoring the Opp “better representation, better democracy” advantages. First, they aren’t relevant to the issue presented by Gov, competency. In presenting a counterplan Opp accepts the Gov harm and must show the counterplan solves that harm as well or better than the Gov plan. They imply—but later contradict themselves—that younger voters will elect younger representatives, but they never link this to the competency issue.

Second, if Opp wants to argue that representation should be the central issue, they need to show that it is more important under the motion than Gov’s issue of competency. You can compare issues or frameworks just as you can compare solvency or benefits. Here, Opp could win by showing that compulsory voting does a better job dealing with competency than age limits. Or Opp could win by showing that *under the motion* representation is a more important issue than competency *and* that compulsory voting does a better job dealing with representation than age limits does. (Note they still would have the “do both” problem to deal with.)

“Under the motion’ is important. Opp could have said, “let’s pay people to vote” arguing the central issue should be poverty. Why not add health care? Free housing? You see where this goes. I think the first thought most people have when seeing this motion is that the issue is competency. While age limits do exclude older electees and likely result in younger representatives, it isn’t clear that fair representation of all age groups is the purpose of age limits. Opp never defines their concept of “accurate representation of constituents” but this is what their arguments imply.

Finally, Gov does reply to the representation arguments, noting there are many reasons people don’t vote, some of them based on the right to protest. Opp never replies to these, so I think the issue is at best a wash.

Consider Your Arguments Carefully

Gov at several points replies that “compulsory voting dilutes the weight of informed voters.” This was the reason given for voter suppression for over 100 years after the Civil War and motivates the policies of many politicians around the world today. They are a list of names and movements you would not want to be associated with. The MO could have nailed Gov to the wall with this, and Gov might have lost the round on the emotional impact even if they had won on other arguments.

The “informed voter” argument might be made in a more acceptable manner by associating it with the right not to vote. Someone compelled to vote against their wishes may vote haphazardly or perversely, or they may turn in a flawed ballot or one wasted on an arbitrary write-in name. There are many ways to protest, and compulsion may increase resentment.

Though they get to the same place—compulsion is bad—they do so by very different paths. The Gov argument as presented is based on denying rights. The alternative version is based on affirming them. Be careful about which side you are on.