

Reviving Reasonability: Affirmative Topicality in the “Negative Age”

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Topicality debates in recent years have been inundated with new buzzwords. “Vote on the offense-defense paradigm: they must have an offensive reason why our interpretation is bad.” “Topicality: It’s not what you do, but what you justify.” The dawn of the Negative Age has given these arguments far more mileage than they deserve. But the main culprits that allow these arguments to flourish are affirmative debaters themselves. Rather than debate these arguments head on, affirmative debaters have jumped on the bandwagon. The purpose of this article is to convince affirmatives, and maybe even some stalwart negatives, to switch horses and come on back to the stables where we’re having a grand ole time making defensive arguments and reviving reasonability.

Leave Offense and Defense to the Pros

The first time I heard an offense-defense paradigm presented in a debate, a debater famous for his smart and persuasive style said: “Defense may win Super Bowls, but it won’t win a topicality debate.” This is a very catchy aphorism, but an intellectually bankrupt one.

First, the strongest defensive arguments reduce the strength of your opponent’s claim to zero. Why would any judge vote for zero? An offense-defense paradigm encourages a judge to ignore that the argument they vote for is logically incoherent. It is equivalent to saying “sure, we don’t do any good but we don’t do any bad either.” This theory has been roundly rejected by negative presumption, where we presume that

endorsing change without any justification is not worth the risks inherent to change. This is certainly true with topicality. Because there is no stable interpretation of the resolution, every topicality interpretation amounts to some degree of change. If defensive arguments demonstrate this change has no benefit, then no judge should endorse it.

Second, debaters use the offense-defense paradigm to mischaracterize each other’s arguments. For example, is a “we meet your topicality violation” argument offensive or defensive? It doesn’t prove that the negative’s interpretation is bad, but it does prove that the affirmative is topical. A we meet argument is the best form of defense to a topicality violation: it ensures that the violation is not a voting issue. Similarly, negatives often characterize affirmative arguments that their interpretation is not grammatical or realistic as defensive because they do not directly answer the limits standard. Yet, proving that the negative’s topicality violation is ignorant of the English language and/or reality should be sufficient to prevent judges from voting for it.

Fundamentally, the problem with the offense-defense paradigm is that it is too simplistic. It’s catchy and easy to understand, but it is a disaster for preserving a well-balanced topic when placed in the hands of misguided youth. Affirmative teams should always make arguments that must be characterized as offensive, such as counter-interpretations or reasons why the

negative's interpretation is detrimental to its own standards. However, the line between offense and defense is thin, and affirmatives should not allow the negative to mischaracterize their arguments. In topicality as well as basketball, the best offense is a great defense.

Justify Your Catchphrase

My old debate partner was fond of saying: "It's not what you do, it's what you justify." I thought that was a bit naïve, but since we won about every time she said it, I suffered quietly.

Topicality, to a large extent, is about what each interpretation justifies. More importantly, however, topicality is about the quality of the debate that each interpretation ensures. There are subtle, but significant differences, between these two viewpoints.

First, the negative frequently relies on this theory as a scare tactic to intimidate judges into voting for them. "If you vote affirmative, every kind of case could be run." Well, that's clearly not true. Defensive arguments are incredibly useful in preventing the limits of interpretations from exploding. For example, if someone says "your affirmative justifies writing UN peacekeeping missions on colored paper", arguing that the word substantially in the resolution prevents affirmatives from making minor changes would rein in the negative's wild interpretations. More importantly, speak about the actual outcome of debates under your interpretation. If they say "our interpretation is good because otherwise the affirmative could not unique our disadvantages," then explain what would actually happen. For example, explain that there are other disadvantages that they could run which would be unique, or that the disadvantages are as unique as the affirmative is inherent, so arguments about what the status quo is doing cut both ways. Affirmative debaters should remember that when the negative says, "it's not what you do, but what you justify", it is always in the negative's interest to make the category of cases you justify as large and absurd as possible. Rather than join the bandwagon, the affirmative should push for more reasonable interpretations.

Second, the statement "what you justify" is too malleable to provide any real guidance. Negatives often prioritize limits as a standard, so they argue the affirmative justifies a broad topic. They use this as a draconian measure to support limited and often unrealistic interpretations. The problem with this theory is that what you justify is a qualitative, rather than quantitative, standard. Instead of numbers of cases, affirmatives should talk about the types of cases that are run. For example, anyone who debated last year likely heard the topicality argument that the word "establish" means to ratify a treaty. Negatives then argued if the affirmative plan did not ratify a treaty, it justified any possible change in US ocean policy. What the affirmative justified, negatives would say, is an unlimited topic. But we never heard much about what the negative justified. First, affirmatives forgot to bring their common sense into the debate room. When in the history of etymology has the word establish, standing on its own, meant to ratify a treaty? Why would any judge want to vote on a silly interpretation? That would justify the negative's finding absurd definitions, or better yet making up their own, that limit out the affirmative. Second, if the five cases named would be non-topical by some other standard, then those cases should not be preferred. The goal of topicality is to create predictable, fair, and equitable debate for both sides. Judges should not prefer interpretations that make achieving this goal more difficult.

Worst of all, when you combine the offense/defense limits paradigm with "what you do is what you justify", the negative is a walking contradiction that affirmatives never notice. Prioritizing limits over all other goals of topicality justifies arbitrary interpretations. For example, if the negative can interpret a word in a nonsensical way to set a fair limit on the topic, why can't the affirmative similarly counter-interpret the topic to where only their affirmative is topical? Both sides lose in this equation because debate must be built on predictable ground: the topic is generated by a general consensus of what words mean, and affirmatives and negatives prepare accordingly. Predictability is almost always more important than limits in that respect because

topicality is about evenly dividing ground for both sides. Allowing debaters to upset the parity that predictable interpretations generate has no stopping point. The end result is that debaters will mangle the resolution in order to gain a competitive advantage.

Reviving Reasonability

So what's reasonable? Finding the right topicality interpretation is not an exact science, but neither is judging. Teams should persuade judges that the simplicity of negative arguments avoids the educational complexity that predictable interpretations of the resolution are written to generate. The negative will always be able to outfox the affirmative on topicality: with the negative block and some ingenuity, they can make affirmative interpretations seem absurd. But utilize your defensive arguments to minimize the absurdity and then capitalize on the strength of affirmative interpretations. This normally means talking about the quality of debate rather than the quantity of cases.

How should the affirmative initiate a discussion about the quality of debate? First, start by defending your own ground. The resolution gives both teams a reasonable expectation of what is topical and affirmatives choose their plan accordingly. The affirmative has a qualified right to their reasonable expectation of the topic: how can affirmatives choose plans if they cannot rely on definitions they have researched that support its topicality? This right isn't unlimited, however, because the negative is encouraged to debate the affirmative on whether their interpretation of words is supported by grammar, common usage, field context, etc. But, the negative's right to re-interpret the topic should be limited to consistent and predictable interpretations. Resorting to arbitrary interpretations based on illogical catchphrases unfairly allows the negative to pull the rug out from under the affirmative.

Second, affirmatives should talk about what makes a good definition. Are dictionary definitions best? Possibly, as long as you are not dealing with a term of art, such as peacekeeping.

What about field context? Shouldn't a definition of peacekeeping by the head of U.N.

Peacekeeping Operations be given more weight than a dictionary definition? Lastly, defining a word in a certain way may be the only way to maintain the grammatical integrity of the resolution. Take the discussion of definitions to another level: move past superficial quantitative discussions of limits and speak directly to the educational benefits and disadvantages of each side's definition.

Third, don't be afraid to talk about debate's purpose. It is a competitive game, but one that should always be based on reason and logic. If what a team does enables illogical arguments to determine the outcome of the debate, then regardless of what unlimited topic the affirmative may allow, it is still better to vote affirmative than eschew reason. Reasonability is important because strict adherence to comparing competing interpretations based on offense/defense types of theories allows the negative to make the perfect the enemy of the good.

Fourth, a reasonability paradigm would help affirmatives to redefine the role of the judge. One of the central negative objections to reasonability interpretations is that they encourage judge intervention because the judge is left without a coherent standard to determine which interpretations are best. Affirmatives can flip this argument on the negative, however, by arguing that the offense/defense and competing interpretations paradigm exceeds the jurisdictional role of the judge. Traditionally, negatives argued that jurisdiction was a voting issue because judges could not vote to endorse a non-topical affirmative. The negative age calls for a judge to act as an arbiter of competing interpretations. That exceeds the role of the judge, however, because the negative is no longer demonstrating the affirmative is non-topical; rather they are only demonstrating that an interpretation that excludes the affirmative is comparatively better for debate. Topicality is a gateway issue which is meant to ensure that both sides have adequate ground for debate: if both interpretations provide similar quantity and

quality of ground, then judges should dispense with topicality and allow the policy debate to begin.

rather than relying on buzzwords. Revive reasonability and bring back the affirmative age.

The affirmative is topical if they meet a reasonable interpretation of the resolution. When affirmatives have strong support for their definition, based on traditional notions of limits, predictability, and field context, then judges should prefer that reasonable interpretation. In a legal context, when the words of a contract are ambiguous, a judge is required to interpret the term either by its ordinary meaning or its meaning as a term of art. Judges are not allowed to accept attorneys' strained interpretations of what the words in a contract mean. When you think about this, the reason is very simple: each party has a vested interest in defining the words in the manner most beneficial to their case. The same is true in a debate. Topicality is a legal action of sorts to enforce the resolutorial contract made between the parties, except in debate the parties have agreed that the words already have a somewhat ambiguous meaning. Each party has an incentive to define the words to best suit their particular interest, be it excluding or including the affirmative.

The judge in a debate sits in the role of either the affirmative's savior or executioner. Topicality is a jurisdictional death penalty for the affirmative. Such punishment is not justified when an affirmative can craft an interpretation of the topic that preserves equitable ground for both sides and fosters the kind of policy discussion the resolution was written to induce. At a minimum, all of these arguments demonstrate that judges should hold negative interpretations to a much higher standard when affirmatives offer reasonable counter-interpretations.

Conclusion

It's time to lose the catchphrases and come on back to reality. A debate isn't the time for you to misplace your common sense; it's the time for you to use it for all it's worth. Use common sense arguments about policy orientation and education to break down over-simplistic negative aphorisms and hyperbole. Encourage judges and those around you to make common sense decisions