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COUNTERPLANS IN POLICY DEBATE

National Federation of State
High School Associations



An Introduction to Counterplans on the Criminal Justice
Topic by Rich Edwards, Baylor University



WHAT IS A COUNTERPLAN?

- A counterplan is a policy defended by the negative team which competes with the affirmative plan and is, on balance, more beneficial than the affirmative plan.



RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COUNTERPLAN

Specificity: The counterplan text must be explicit

Nontopicality: Some theorists say the counterplan must represent the NON-resolution

Competitiveness: The counterplan must give the judge a reason to choose between the plan and counterplan.



COUNTERPLAN SPECIFICITY

Sample Counterplan Text:

- **Example 1:** State counterplan: The 50 state governments will implement each of the changes in policing mentioned in the affirmative plan: banning choke-holds, abandoning qualified immunity for abusive police methods, etc.
- **Example 2:** Defunding the police: The affirmative proposes to “reform” policing, whereas the counterplan proposes to abandon policing as we know it.



COUNTERPLAN NONTOPICALITY

Though some judges will continue to think this is important, many contemporary debate theorists say it is NOT, for the following reasons:

1. The affirmative team is asking for adoption of the PLAN not the resolution.
2. Competitiveness provides adequate protection against abuse.
3. Ground is preserved, since the affirmative team had free opportunity to choose its position first from anywhere within the resolution.



COUNTERPLAN COMPETITIVENESS

Mutual Exclusivity: It is logically impossible to do both the plan and counterplan.

Net Benefits: The counterplan alone is more beneficial than the plan plus the counterplan (in practice this means that the counterplan avoids a key disadvantage offered by the negative).

Other (suboptimal) Possibilities: Resource competition,
Philosophical differences



MUTUAL EXCLUSIVITY

It is logically impossible to adopt both the plan and the counterplan.

Example: In the case of Counterplan Example 2: The counterplan proposes to abandon rather than reform policing. The negative would say that it is logically impossible to both abolish and reform policing.

Problems with Mutual Exclusivity: Often the competitiveness based on mutual exclusivity is artificial because the text of the counterplan simply bans the plan. Often the affirmative team will suggest ways that the essence of the plan could be combined with the essence of the counterplan.



NET BENEFITS

“Net Benefits” competitiveness shows why it would be undesirable to combine the plan and counterplan; as a practical matter, there is some disadvantage to the plan which the counterplan does not link to. Technically speaking, “net benefits” means that the counterplan alone is more advantageous than the plan plus the counterplan.

In the Counterplan 1 example, the negative team would claim that even though it is logically possible to have both the states and the federal government reform policing, the counterplan alone is superior because it would avoid both the presidential elections (politics) disadvantage and the federalism disadvantage.





PERMUTATIONS

A permutation is an argument offered by the affirmative to demonstrate the non-competitiveness of a counterplan; it suggests a specific way that the plan and counterplan can be desirably combined in order to avoid the negative disadvantage(s).

Consider the following example: The affirmative plan calls for the decriminalization of drug offenses (a change in the severity of sentencing) and the negative counterplan calls for drug legalization (a non-topical option, since the resolution only allows for changes in sentencing). The affirmative permutation claims that the plan and counterplan can be desirably combined: Legalization means that no additional persons will be convicted of drug offenses; decriminalization means that persons who have already been convicted of drug offenses will avoid imprisonment.



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