

Counterplans

The Negative's Turn to Argue for Change

Sometimes the world is messed up, and there's just no arguing about it. For the affirmative, this can be great news (well, in a totally weird kind of way). The point is that the affirmative has a great advantage when there are terrible, indisputable problems in the world that can be solved by the affirmative plan. Sometimes these problems consist of ongoing problems that are inherent in the current system (like racism, environmental destruction, poverty, disease, and so on). Other times these problems take the form of crises that are on their way but might still be prevented by timely action (global warming or imminent nuclear conflict, for example).

When the consensus of experts is that things are (or are about to be) really bad, the affirmative can have a competitive advantage that it is hard for the negative to overcome. After all, if we are sure that the current system is causing a lot of harms, then it may be a good idea to pass the affirmative plan even if it might not be completely effective – or even if it causes some disadvantages. If the harms caused by the status quo are bad enough, then the advantages of the plan can be nearly impossible for the negative to overcome.

A long time ago, some clever negative debaters thought to themselves, "hey, it isn't fair that the affirmative is the only team that gets to propose a plan for change! And anyway, that's not how the real world works. If someone proposes one idea for change, another person comes up with some different idea. We don't just debate about whether or not to act; we debate about what action to take, too." It is because of bitter, unhappy rants like this that great progress is made. Before long, it became common for negative debaters to propose their own plans for change. These negative plans are called "counterplans."

Requirements for Counterplans

Being able to come up with a unique plan for change is a powerful tool for the negative team to have. After all, the

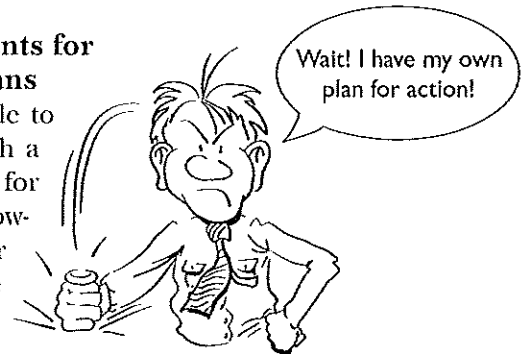
affirmative is limited to plans that are examples of the kind of change called for by the topic or resolution. The negative does not have to be topical, so it has no such limits. As with everything about debate, not everyone agrees about what kinds of limits are reasonable for negative counterplans. However, the following list represents the most common beliefs on this subjects.

Counterplans should be different from the plan

Counterplans can be very similar to the plan, or they can be completely different from the plan. The point is that there has to be *some* kind of difference. Otherwise, why are you even debating, and how can the judge tell whom to vote for? However...

Counterplans should have something to do with the issues raised by the affirmative

Judges are likely to consider counterplans that have nothing to do with the IAC abusive and unfair to the affirmative. You must explain the counterplan in such a way that it seems like a *response* to the affirmative plan. You can do this by demonstrating that the counterplan solves the harms identified by the IAC. If you choose to run a counterplan that claims to solve for harms other than those in the IAC, you must still be able to explain a relationship between your new harms and the original IAC harms. You can do this by demonstrating that the counterplan solves a problem that is larger or more immediate than the harms of the IAC or avoids a potential pitfall of the affirmative plan.



Counterplans must be competitive

For a counterplan to be competitive, it must provide a reason to reject the affirmative plan. This is very important. It is not enough for the counterplan to be a good idea. It's not even enough for the counterplan to be a better idea than the affirmative plan. The counterplan itself must provide reasons why the plan is a bad idea. There are many ways to prove competition. Here are two of the most common:

1. **Mutual Exclusivity.** This means the counterplan and the affirmative plan cannot occur at the same time. They cannot exist together. For example, the counterplan might ban actions like the plan. It is also possible that the counterplan and the plan make use of the same scarce resource. In that case, you might argue that not doing the counterplan is an "opportunity cost" of doing the plan.
2. **Net Benefits.** When the negative runs a counterplan, the judge now has at least three options to consider: vote for the plan, vote for the counterplan, or vote for some combination of the plan and the counterplan (this usually means an affirmative ballot). To say the counterplan is "net beneficial" means that doing the counterplan alone provides more benefits than doing the plan alone *and* provides more benefits than doing the counterplan and plan together. Counterplans, like affirmative plans, can have advantages. These advantages prove why the counterplan is better than the affirmative. Often, the advantages of the counterplan are negative disadvantages to the affirmative plan. In some cases, the best "net benefit" for a counterplan is the fact that it does not link to one or more of the disadvantages caused by the plan.

Types of Counterplans

There are so many different kinds of counterplans that we couldn't list all of them. However, here are some of the most common basic types.

Alternate solvency mechanisms

These kinds of counterplans offer a different plan designed to solve exactly the same problem as the plan. Usually, these counterplans come from experts in the same field as those who recommend the affirmative plan. If the IAC tries to improve education by making school days longer, for example, the counterplan might try to improve education by paying teachers more.

Agent counterplans

These counterplans advocate the same action as the affirmative, but use a different agent of action. For example, they might advocate presidential action instead of congressional action, or they might act through another country's government.

Plan-inclusive counterplans

PICs (as they are often called) contain most of the actions taken by the affirmative plan, with only minor differences. In some cases, a PIC might leave a single word out of the plan (or add a single word to it). Affirmatives often argue that PICs are unfair because they "steal" arguments made by the affirmative.

Consult counterplans

Especially with the topic involves foreign policy, negatives might run counterplans that differ from the plan only in that they require binding consultation by the U.S. with some other country or organization (like China or the UN). These counterplans are sometimes considered illegitimate. Very few policy experts discuss whether the U.S. should consult with its allies about individual laws or policy changes, so the affirmative will have trouble researching answers.

The "Status" of the Counterplan

When the negative makes arguments against the affirmative case, they can concede that any of their arguments is wrong at any time without penalty (except that they cannot use that argument to win the debate). Negatives can also "drop" (or "kick") a disadvantage at any time unless the affirmative has claimed to turn either the link or the impact.

Can the negative kick a counterplan at any time? It is important for the affirmative to know this, because if the negative can decide not to advocate their own counterplan part of the way through the debate, this will have an impact on which affirmative arguments will win the round. Many negative teams will argue that the negative should always get to choose from two options: the counterplan or the status quo. In other words, the negative gets to choose sometime in the debate if it is going to defend the counterplan or the current system. You will often hear the 2AC ask the 1NC “what is the status of the counterplan?” That means “can you kick the counterplan, and what happens if you do?” There are three popular answers to this question.

The counterplan is unconditional

This means that the negative is committed to advocating the counterplan throughout the entire debate. They are promising not to kick the counterplan.

The counterplan is conditional

The negative is warning you that they reserve the right to choose between the counterplan or the status quo any time during the debate. Many judges find this answer to be illegitimate because the affirmative won’t be able to tell what the negative team is defending until late in the debate..

The counterplan is dispositional

The negative reserves the right to kick the counterplan at any time unless the affirmative “straight turns” it. That means they can kick the counterplan unless the only answers the affirmative makes are reasons why the counterplan is bad. If the affirmative makes theoretical answers – like permutations (see below) or objections to the kind of counterplan being run – the negative can kick the counterplan. Dispositional counterplans were developed as a way to compromise between the negative’s desire to kick the counterplan if it needs to and the perception by many that conditionality is unfair to the affirmative.

Answering Counterplans

Just as counterplans were developed by negative debaters to help them deal with troublesome affirmatives, clever affirmative debaters have developed a number of different strategies for answering counterplans.

Challenging the Counterplan’s Solvency

Since most counterplans claim to solve most (if not all) of the 1AC advantages, one of the simplest ways to attack a counterplan is to challenge its ability to solve. Affirmatives often claim that the counterplan has a “solvency deficit,” which is to say that it does not solve the 1AC harms as well as the plan.

Answering the Net Benefit

Net benefits often take the form of disadvantages that the counterplan does not link to. Sometimes they are advantages only the counterplan by itself can access. You can answer these arguments

in the same way you would answer a regular disadvantage or advantage. You might argue, for example, that the counterplan actually links to the disad that is supposed to be its net benefit.

Disads to the Counterplan

All plans for change have potential problems. Affirmative often prepare disadvantages that link to commonly run counterplans. Make sure these don’t link to your plan, too.

Permutations

A permutation (or “perm,” if you’re a cool debater) is a test to see if the counterplan is actually competitive. The affirmative suggests that the plan and the counterplan could be combined to form a single, successful policy. The affirmative describes how the plan and counterplan can be combined, then often argues (or even reads evidence) that the combination would

be the best possible policy. In this way, the affirmative demonstrates that the counterplan is not actually competitive. There are a number of common permutations.

“Do both”

This kind of permutation suggests that the entire counterplan can be merged with the entire plan, and that both policies can be successfully implemented at the same time. There are several different ways to interpret any example of “doing both,” however, so this kind of permutation should always be explained.

Time-frame permutations

Sometimes two policies can only be combined if one is implemented before the other one. Time frame permutations provide an order for implementing the plan and the counterplan. Sometimes these permutations suggest that a substantial amount of time should pass before the second policy is passed. Many negatives will argue that time-frame permutations are illegitimate, especially if the delay is very long. The idea is that the perm “adds” the idea of a delay to the combined policy that is not present in either the plan or the counterplan. This brings us to...

Intrinsic permutations

Some permutations combine the plan, the counterplan *and* another action that is not contained in either the plan or counterplan. While this kind of permutation is beneficial to the affirmative, most negatives will object to this strategy on the basis of the argument that no counterplan can win if the affirmative is given permission to add new, unrelated things to the plan.

Severance permutations

Some permutations do not include the entire plan and the entire counterplan. If the permutation includes the entire counterplan but not the entire plan, most negatives will object that the perm “severs” parts of the plan and is therefore illegitimate. The argument here is that the affirmative should, at least, have to advocate all of its original plan. If the affirmative can sever parts of the plan that link to negative argu-

ments, it would always win. Most judges seem to find this logic persuasive. However, it is less clear whether affirmatives can get away with perms that include all the plan but only part of the counterplan. There seems to be room for clever affirmatives to justify this kind of severance permutation.

Procedural Objections

More than any other argument, counterplans tend to be subject to procedural objections. One of the most common arguments made by any affirmative is that the counterplan is, for one reason or another, unfair. Here are two of these procedural objections.

PICs are bad

Plan-inclusive counterplans are more popular than ever, and affirmatives are even more likely to argue that it is unfair for the negative to get to advocate most of the plan. They will say, among other things, that this forces the affirmative to argue against its own claims, that it results in bad debate because the judge must distinguish between tiny policy differences, or that it gives the negative too many counterplan options.

Conditionality (or dispositionality) is bad

Affirmatives are already unhappy that negatives have the option to offer their own proposals for change. Imagine how much more upset they are when the negative gets to make one of these proposals in the 1NC and then *change their minds* and go back to defending the status quo later in the debate. The 2AC asks about the status of the counterplan in almost every cross-ex of a 1NC where a counterplan is run because affirmatives almost always object to conditionality or dispositionality. The heart of this argument is that these two practices cause the negative to become a moving target (which policy they are advocating might change during the debate). 2ACs, in particular, are put under tremendous pressure because they have to defend the plan against the status quo *and* against a possible negative counterplan. Since the affirmative only gets one advocacy (the plan), they argue that the negative should also be limited to a single option within any debate.