



Team Policy Debate - Judge Reminders and FAQs

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What are some distinctives of policy debate?

Policy debate challenges students to think critically about laws, regulations, and policies that impact societies. It seeks to identify possible problems with current conditions (the status quo) and weigh the advantages and disadvantages associated with making a change in policy. The requirement that debaters alternate between affirming and negating a resolution helps students learn that there are reasonable arguments for both sides of most policy proposals. Debaters use different ways to structure cases and arguments, but most rounds will feature the following elements.

- **Assessment of the “status quo” or the way things are**
 - **The affirmative team** will generally identify a problem with a current policy (or the lack of policy) and try to explain the resulting harms or benefits withheld.
 - **The negative team** may call into question whether the alleged harms are really serious, or whether they can be solved some other way.
- **Clash over a proposed plan to change the “status quo” or the way things are**
 - **The affirmative team** generally proposes a plan for a policy change that will provide advantages when compared with the status quo.
 - **The negative team** may question whether the proposed plan will actually solve the alleged problems with the current situation. They may also point out disadvantages and argue that those outweigh the possible advantages. Or, they may present an alternative approach.

What should I expect from experienced policy debaters?

- **Expect Solid Argumentation.** Debaters should explain the logical connections between arguments and how those arguments support their position.
- **Expect Support for Claims.** Debaters should support claims they make with examples, analogies, their own analysis, or cited sources (known as evidence).
- **Expect Clash:** Debaters should engage with their opponent's most important arguments, and explain why their own arguments are superior. While they may legitimately decide to agree with their opponent on some issues, they should also identify areas of disagreement and defend their own positions regarding those points.

What should I NOT expect of policy debaters?

- **Do not expect a perfect plan from Affirmative Teams:** No policy is perfect, so the Affirmative Team should not be held to an unreasonably high standard for what a proposed policy change will achieve.
- **Do not expect perfect preparation from Negative Teams:** The range of policy-change proposals that teams can introduce when they are assigned as the Affirmative Team in a round can be staggering. It is entirely possible for the Negative Team to hear a policy proposal idea for the first time during the first Affirmative speech. This does not remove the burden for the Negative Team to convince the judge that the plan should not be adopted, but it may mean that the Negative Team must rely on probing questions, logical assessments, appeals to common sense, and generic arguments that pertain to evaluating any policy change.
- **Do not expect answers to every argument:** With limited time, debaters must often choose which arguments to prioritize, so ignoring or “dropping” a lesser argument that is outweighed by a more important one should not necessarily be considered a losing move.

How do I choose the winning team in policy debate?

Every round is different, and the deciding factors will vary, but the following questions can help to evaluate the round in a fair and reasonable way. Keep in mind that in close rounds, even experienced judges may disagree about who won. In every sense, judging debate comes down to making judgment calls, so we simply ask that you decide which team was most persuasive to you.

What to Consider

- **Quality of the Affirmative Team's Plan:** Does the plan solve a real problem within the resolution without creating disadvantages that outweigh the advantages? See the [Decision Table for an Affirmative Case](#) for help with this.
- **Quality of Reasoning:** Which team made the best logical connections between key arguments and the issues in the round?
- **Quality of Arguments:** Which team presented the best quality and depth of arguments in favor of their position?
- **Clarity:** Which team was easier to follow and understand?
- **Quality of Support:** Which team provided the best support for critical points? When debaters support their arguments by referring to expert sources, look for a verbal citation and direct quotation so that you can judge the quality and accuracy of the evidence.
- **Alternative Approaches:** If one of the teams used a non-traditional approach to the debate round, did they convince you of the validity and soundness of that approach?
- **Conduct:** A debater or debate team who plainly behaves in a deceitful or rude manner toward an opponent should not be granted a win.

What NOT to consider

- **Personal opinions or biases:** Remember that your evaluation should be based on what the debaters said in the round rather than on what you personally believe about a topic. You are evaluating how well the teams debated each other, not how well they overcame your own biases. Approach the topic with an open mind; debaters have been assigned their sides, and they debate on both sides throughout the tournament. Feel free to apply a filter of common sense, but try not to give debaters credit for any arguments that they didn't actually make, and don't dismiss an argument only because you do not personally agree with it.
- **Partiality:** Set aside partiality based on competitor name recognition, known levels of experience, appearance, etc.
- **Late arguments:** Debaters should present all of their main assertions and lines of argumentation in the constructive speeches. Therefore, judges should set aside any completely new lines of argumentation that are raised for the first time in rebuttal speeches because the opponent is deprived of an adequate opportunity to respond.
- **Speaker points:** It is possible for a less eloquent and/or less experienced speaker to win a round based on critical points of argumentation but be ranked lower in speaker points.

Decision Table for an Affirmative Case

There are a range of reasonable methods judges may use to make a policy debate decision. Debaters may persuade judges to use any reasonable method. In the absence of a clear judging framework, the following questions may be helpful. Remember that it is up to the debaters to make the necessary arguments to earn your vote regardless of how they approach the round.

Questions to ask yourself	Interpreting your answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is reform really needed? Did the Affirmative Team present one or more real and significant reasons to change the status quo? These reasons may be harms of the current system or advantages that cannot be realized without a policy change. • Will it work? Would the proposed policy reform work to solve or significantly improve the problems of the status quo? Are there advantages that can only be realized by adopting the affirmative plan? • Is it worth it? Would the advantages or justifications presented by the Affirmative Team for their plan outweigh any disadvantages presented by the Negative Team? • Is the plan on topic? Does the Affirmative Team's plan fit within the topic specified by the resolution? Did the Affirmative significantly reform foreign policy toward one or more of the Central American countries listed in the resolution? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → If the Negative Team presented compelling arguments that the proposed reform is not really needed, then it probably does not make sense to vote to implement the reform. → If the Negative Team presented sufficiently strong arguments that the proposed plan would not work, then it would not make sense to vote to implement the plan. → If the Negative Team presented sufficiently strong arguments that the advantages of the proposed plan would be outweighed by disadvantages, it probably does not make sense to vote to implement the plan. → If the proposed reform does not fit within the scope of the resolution, it should not earn a judge's vote.
<p>Not Sure? If the two teams presented arguments that seem equally valid on all of these questions, then the round was very close. Your decision will have to be based on which arguments you thought were most important and deserve the most weight.</p>	

Do speaker points affect who wins? How do I assign them?

Speaker point totals do not determine who wins a round. They are used for a separate set of awards in each tournament, and when necessary they are used to break ties between teams with equal win-loss records. Therefore, we ask that judges refer to the [speaker point rubric](#) and try to score as accurately as possible.



Where can I find helpful definitions for common terms used in NCFCA concerning debate?

[Helpful definitions](#) can be found in our [debate rules](#).

What are the debate round protocols I can expect?

When the round is ready to begin, the speakers will introduce themselves and may also ask about your judging experience or background. Feel free to share honestly about your experience or inexperience. However, we ask that you refrain from engaging in discussion or asking questions of the debaters about the round and that you not reveal your win-loss decision to anyone during the tournament.

We want to assure you that **debaters are responsible for explaining all that you need to know in the round**. If you are confused about something they say, that is their fault, not yours. They will also know their correct speaking order, keep track of their own time limits, and hold one another accountable for following rules.

If you have any questions about how to handle something in a round, you can reach out to tournament administration in person or through your judge dashboard.

Debate Evidence Review

If you would like to see a piece of evidence that debaters referred to in the round for clarification or accuracy, you may do so **at the end of the round**. (Please see the [evidence review guidelines](#).)