

THE CASE AGAINST MUTUAL PREFERENCE JUDGING

by
Jenny Heidt

P O L I C Y D E B A T E

Although mutual preference judging is still relatively rare in high school, directors of some large tournaments are experimenting with this system. For those of you who are not familiar with mutual preference, it is part of the tabulation program where all teams in the tournament rank all of the judges and judges are placed in debates where they are mutually preferred. Ideally, all teams would have mutually top ranked judges but there are not enough highly preferred judges to go around. As a result, teams sometimes get middle or low preferences but the other team also has that judge ranked in the middle or

the college community, I would like to discourage high school tournament directors from using this option. My students groaned at the idea of my writing this article. They want mutual preference judging because they want more control over who is in the back of the room. Although I have some sympathy for debaters who want mutual preference, the disadvantages of the system outweigh the benefits.

First, mutual preference systems feed into the elitist notion that most people in the community are unqualified to judge. The basic assumption of offering debaters so much control over their judges is that some judges are good and some are bad. Usually, debaters will prefer only highly specialized judges who can judge college-style debates. College style debate appeals to high school students for a number of reasons. They idolize college debaters that they work with at camps, they discover that speed offers significant advantages over slow teams and they enjoy the “rush” from thinking and talking fast. The downside is that students can become very snobby about judges. Only judges who are very experienced, well versed in theoretical issues as well as topic related

“...we need to keep our students on track by discouraging judge complaints and emphasizing the value of audience adaptation...”

information can judge very fast debates. The sad conclusion some students draw from the difficulty of judging these debates is that intelligent but less trained people should not judge policy debate.

low so there is a perception of a level playing field. People running the tab room usually place the most highly preferred judges in break rounds or at the top of the bracket so that the toughest competition has the most preferred judging.

I am not arguing that policy judges should have zero training. They do need some basic training in argumentation. For instance, they ought to know that they should judge based on arguments made by the debaters and not their personal preferences. They also ought to be familiar with topicality, time limits and the basic structure of common arguments. It would do our students a disservice to put in completely lay judges after they work so hard to prepare. However, the majority of people in the pool at most high school tournaments fall somewhere in between. They are not college debaters but are also not lay judges. They can make intelligent decisions but prefer that debates be slower and may be less familiar with some of the more radical arguments.

New computer programs have made mutual preference a very powerful tool. The information can all be downloaded from e-mail and the computer places the judges with minimal interference from tab room workers. As someone who occasionally tabs college tournaments, I have seen tournament directors use everything from an “A, B, C, Strike” format to a nine category system to ordinal rankings of all judges from 1-150 (or however many judges there are at the tournament). College debaters have grown accustomed to carefully selecting their judges and coaches have gotten good at filling out their preference forms to gain strategic advantages. For instance, some teams track the average speaker points awarded by certain judges and prefer people who give out higher points. Teams have also learned to highly prefer people who are not judging very many rounds in an effort to force highly preferred judges into their debates. Almost all teams select judges based on who is friendly to particular types of arguments.

Although mutual preference seems here to stay in

I regularly see middle of the road judges get abused by both debaters and coaches. Every time these judges experience uncomfortable question periods where debaters essentially accuse them of being incompetent, we are teaching students that it is the burden of the listener to be persuaded and not the speaker to persuade. I am especially horrified to see coaches yelling at judges.

What a terrible example! Students should accept losses gracefully and use the ballot or oral critique to find out more about how to persuade that judge. Students who internalize losses will improve faster because they try to change. How many of you know debaters who blame over 50% of their losses on judges? Aside from the lost opportunities to improve, it is an unhealthy character trait to blame other people for losses. It is natural for a student who is disappointed to look for an excuse but we need to keep our students on track by discouraging judge complaints and emphasizing the value of audience adaptation.

Even the biggest fans of national circuit debate have to admit that there is also enormous educational value in slower persuasion. A well rounded policy debater ought to be just as comfortable slowly making intelligent case attacks in front of a more conservative judge as they are speeding through several off case arguments in front of a college style judge. Students should be taught that adaptation is a value in itself. Crafting a message to an audience has obvious real life applications. Both styles of debate have value, both belong in the community, and both types of judges should be respected and encouraged to judge the best debates.

Mutual preference judging also further divides the community over argument choice. Almost every college team can tell you if they are more policy-oriented or more critique-oriented. Many of the preference sheets from these two camps read as exact opposites. An “A” for one school is a strike for another. The result is that there are almost two judging pools. Some schools almost never see policy judges and some schools successfully avoid critique judges. When the two types of schools meet, they have one of the few judges on their lists that they have in common. When debaters are able to pick their judges so carefully, it means that their argument choices are more extreme. Most of you have probably heard stories of college debaters dancing, showing art or otherwise “performing” instead of engaging in traditional policy debate. You have also probably heard of traditional policy debate only round robins or teams that have basically refused to debate

critiques. By protecting both types of teams from more diverse judges, they are able to focus in on only one type of argument. Wouldn't the students learn more from having to debate in both camps? Knowing that they would have to adapt to a wider pool would keep their arguments more moderate in the first place. Moderation is not good in itself but adaptation serves an educational purpose of training students to be flexible and respectful of a wide variety of audiences. So far, most high school squads have avoided extremes in either direction because they know that they will lose debates in front of less sympathetic judges.

Are there bad judges? Yes, there are judges who should not be allowed to judge. People who are extremely lazy or judge while intoxicated immediately leap to mind. There are also judges whose oral critiques are terribly harsh or use foul language that I would be embarrassed to expose students to. There are also situations where a judge has not struck themselves but should have because they have a personal connection with a debater. As an alternative to mutual preference, tournament directors could offer up strikes to take care of these limited situations.

We are a small community and seem to be getting smaller. In a recent article James Copeland noted that the number of NFL affiliate schools who do policy debate has dropped by half! Mutual preference judging would be another step down the path of hyper-specialization that is prompting schools to abandon the policy community in favor of Ted Turner Debate or LD, where judges and debaters do not go to such extremes. We should avoid things like mutual preference in favor of working with our debaters so that they are equally prepared for different styles. Long live policy debate in all its forms!

(Jenny Heidt is Director of Forensics at The Westminster Schools in Atlanta, Georgia. Previously, Jenny was the Assistant Director at Pace Academy where her team won the Tournament of Champions. Jenny also helped to coach an NDT champion at Emory University before starting her high school coaching career.)

