

A Coach's Notes¹

Everett Rutan

Connecticut Debate Association

ejrutan3@ctdebate.org

Connecticut Debate Association

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This House prefers open primaries.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the November 12, 2022, CDA tournament and topic. Previous year's editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Greenwich presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. If you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Greenwich Final Round

The final round at Greenwich was a good one to have seen. It brings up a lot of issues about definitions, frameworks, arguments, counterplans and complexity that are worth reviewing. In this edition of Coach's Notes, I first present my RFD, then explore the details.

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Final Round RFD

This is an extended, edited and corrected version of the “reason for decision” I wrote after the round and posted on the Tabroom ballot for the Greenwich and Blind Brook teams in the final round.

Table 1: Case Outline (for more detail, see accompanying flow)	
Gov	Opp
Definition: “open primary” a primary where any voter can vote in any party and decide the day of the election Framework: net benefit to all Americans, especially with respect to values like democracy	We agree with a framework of net benefits Def: We define “This House” as the US Federal Gov’t and focus the debate on the Presidential election Counterplan: Replace primaries with an open, general election (“OGE”) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OGE will use ranked-choice voting (“RCV”) • Candidates petition to get on ballot, say 100,000 signatures for most states, fewer for smaller states
G1 : Open Primaries (“OP”) result in more political engagement G2: Closed primaries (“CP”) worsen extremism G3: Open primaries improve the quality of candidates	O1: OP result in “raiding”, voting in the other party’s primary for the worst candidate O2: OGE/RCV will have higher turnout O3: More independent candidates O4 : RCV is more democratic

I felt the debate came down to turnout and candidate quality. Extremism is a wash: with the counterplan, whether closed primaries worsen extremism doesn’t matter as Opp is no longer defending the status quo. I don’t see raiding as a big problem. It’s difficult to marshal that many voters, and, while neither mention it, the greater problem seems to be cross-party contributions to unfavorable candidates, a problem under any system. Ranked-choice voting may or may not be more democratic, but the benefit comes from ranked-choice voting, not whether or not the primaries are open, or whether or not there are primaries.

Opp wins the turnout argument, but only because general elections almost (the qualifier may not be necessary) always attract more voters than primaries. But I think Gov wins the more important candidate quality argument by moderating the type of candidate the major parties end up with in the general election. I believe that is more important from a net benefits perspective, so I vote Gov.

Gov calls the Opp counterplan “abusive”, as an “open general election” is “open” and parties are less important. On the abuse call, as I explained to debaters earlier in the day, I don’t think it is correct. First, you can’t just say something is abusive, you need to explain why, and no one does. Gov only says it could be considered an open election.

The Opp counterplan may be unexpected, but it is a clear alternative; it is competitive with the motion in that you cannot do both at the same time; and I can think of good arguments for and against both the plan and the counterplan so a fair debate is possible.

What I would have said on Gov--and which Gov comes close to saying but not as clearly as I'd like--is that the Opp counterplan accepts the principle embodied in the motion: that everyone should have a chance to vote in every election. The Opp counterplan is actually an attempt to reframe the debate as whether or not there should be primaries at all. Opp never says this, and I comment more on this idea below. But the main issue in the motion is whether or not primaries should be open, and that is grounds for a Gov vote, or at least a Gov argument that weakens the Opp case.

I also would have noted Opp's re-definition of "This House" to the US Federal Government and the attempt to limit the debate to the Presidential election. This was only mentioned at the top of the LOC, briefly in the fourth Opp contention, and in the reply to it by the MG citing the Electoral College, so it didn't figure much in the round. Opp has no right to redefine TH, which Opp implicitly defines by presenting a case that covers all election in the United States. But it gives Opp an argument (which Opp does not use), that the Presidential election is only one of thousands held across the US, and so Opp limits the impact of their case to this one event. Even if they win that, they would lose the debate when one weighs a single, quadrennial election against all the others.

Finally, ranked-choice voting is fairly complex, and Opp proceeds as if everyone understands what it is, how it works and what the implications are. I was surprised Gov did not attack this, pointing to the long, confusing delays and the voter education issues in the Alaska examples described in the packet (though, at the very end of the packet so hard to get to in one hour of case prep). My impression was Opp didn't fully understand ranked-choice voting from some of the claims they made, but I cannot be certain. See my comment on complexity below.

Abuse Calls

Two teams came to Tab during the tournament to ask whether a counterplan similar to Opp's was abusive. That suggests two questions: Was it abusive? Is calling a case abusive the best way to deal with it?

"Abusive" is not a debate term I am familiar with. The Debate Guru² defines it as "Any action in round that gives one team a strategic advantage over its opposing team; abuse can be called out by reading theory", which I don't find useful. Gaining a strategic advantage over your opponents is a reasonable objective in debate. The 2022 NPDLC TOC Jargon Guide³ defines it as "An action in round that can (see "potential abuse") or does (see "proven abuse") disrupt the round." Again, it isn't very clear what this might be.

² See <https://thedebugguru.weebly.com/dictionary.html>

³ See <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1NYNWxnEF9WI7P-FYWtEGw73URxI2V--5pX5cWecEFKA/edit#gid=0>

What I assume Gov means here is that the Opp definitions or counterplan are either unfair or violate some rule of debate. As noted above, the counterplan may be unexpected, but it is “competitive” or “mutually exclusive” with the Gov plan in that you cannot implement both of them simultaneously. There are reasonable arguments for and against the counterplan versus the Gov plan that do not a priori favor either side. The counterplan might be considered a “plan inclusive counterplan” in that it incorporates part of the Gov plan, an open election. If you read deeply into counterplan theory—choose some night when you are having trouble sleeping—some consider plan inclusive counterplans as invalid.

Opp’s re-definition of “This House” is invalid. Opp gave no reason why Gov’s implicit inclusion of all US elections is incorrect or unfair. Similarly, their attempt to limit the debate to the Presidential election is also invalid. Gov has the right to a reasonable definition of terms. To challenge or redefine them you must show why they are unreasonable, and Opp does nothing more than assert a new definition. Worse, they don’t really use it to support any arguments, other than a subpoint of their fourth contention. Don’t waste time on definitions you don’t need or use.

The counterplan, which I believe is the real target of Gov’s abuse call, is probably not abusive. The Opp redefinition and limitation are, and the reasons—which Gov does not give—are clear. In the RFD above I briefly suggested a better way to deal with both of these. Let’s look at it a bit more closely.

No one likes debates that devolve into arguments over definitions or counter claims about what the rules of debate are. There are no rules of debate, and even that rule isn’t a rule as we clearly specify and enforce rules about the order and length of speeches. But there are recommended best practices, and, more importantly, reasons why they are best practices. Gov has the right to set reasonable definitions in order to permit a good debate, and Gov has the corresponding obligation to choose terms that lead to a good debate. If you apply the logic behind a recommendation like this, you can avoid arguing about definitions or rules and turn the issue into an argument in your favor.

In my opinion the Opp counterplan is legitimate but weak. An open general election concedes the idea that voters have the right to vote for all the candidates. That is the driving idea behind open primaries. Don’t call the counterplan abusive; explain to the judge how it concedes the central principle motivating the Gov side of the round.

If the counterplan only applies to Presidential elections, it only applies to one election held every four years. It ignores all of the other elections in a Presidential year, and all the elections in the off years. The President may be the most powerful elected official, but that power is purposely limited. If Opp wins its contentions on this one election, it is easily outweighed by Gov’s impact on all those other elections.

Always look for an opportunity to create offense for your side!

Complexity Is Not Your Friend...⁴

There is a tendency among debaters to try to be clever so as to win by surprise, intimidation or complexity. That may often work against a weaker team, but usually fails

⁴ This section was originally part of the posted RFD.

against strong opponents because it obscures the real issues in the debate and confuses the judge.

There is a clear, simple, direct clash inherent in this motion. Gov supports the principle that everyone should be allowed to vote on important issues, and selecting candidates is certainly an important issue. Opp recognizes that politics requires hard work: why should voters unwilling to do the work of building and supporting a party have a say in the choice of that party's candidate? It's right to vote versus fairness. The more you drift from the central conflict, the more risk you take of confusing the judge or getting lost in your own arguments.

Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is rather complex. Opp never explains the details, assuming their opponents and the judges are familiar with them and their implications. The concept—vote for your heart's desire, but have an electable backup—is not quite how it works. If no candidate gets a majority, the candidates with the fewest votes is dropped and their second choice votes are counted as if they were first choice. This continues until someone gets just enough over 50% to be declared the winner. The mathematics gets complicated—I had a course in college just on voting theory. Depending on how voter preferences are distributed, the idea that your vote always counts isn't entirely correct. This [Wikipedia article](#) is a good introduction if you want to pursue it further. My point is that it is hard to make a convincing argument based on the details in an eight-minute constructive when you have a lot of other ground to cover.

Does RCV help Opp here? The raiding argument is really based on the fact that parties hold separate primaries. The turnout argument is really based on the fact that general elections outdraw primaries. Gov and Opp will likely attract more independent candidates once elections are open to independent voters and anyone with enough signatures—true of most primaries—can get on the ballot. Is RCV more democratic? That's just an Opp assertion, with no “compared to what...” and “using which standard...” Again, the voting theory literature—outside the scope of this debate—says the answer isn't clear. RCV is probably the only reasonable way to run an election which is “open” in the sense that many candidates can easily get on the ballot, but that may not be the best way to run an election process. RCV sounds sophisticated, but I don't think it helps Opp's offense much in the round.

When the central issue in the motion is clear, debate that issue. It leads to a better quality debate, and, in my experience, a greater chance of winning.

...Unless You Can Make It Simple

As noted, the obvious central issue in the motions is open versus closed primaries, one side arguing for the right to be heard, the other side arguing for the right to organize and benefit from their work. Here “open” means “open to voters”.

But there is an alternative meaning of “open” which is “open to all candidates”, and which would inherently have to be open to all voters. In the United States, most

primaries are elections to choose the candidates for one political party (though if there are multiple parties, their primaries are all usually held on the same day, and for all electoral posts in the jurisdiction). But some States like Alaska, as described in the packet, hold an open primary with candidates from all parties, with a certain number advancing to the general election. Or, as Opp proposed in this debate, one could skip the primaries and hold a single, open general election.

In the round, the LO began by accepting Gov's framework of net benefits, and then launched into the Opp counterplan, an open general election with ranked-choice voting and a petition/signature requirement to get on the ballot. Suppose the LO had said this instead:

The Government case says the problem is voter access. We on Opposition disagree: the issue is candidate access and the problem is political parties which try to limit it. We don't need open primaries, we need an open general election, and so we propose a counterplan: a single, open general election. Candidates would gain a place on the ballot through a petition and signature process. This would likely mean many more than two candidates, and we believe ranked-choice voting is the fairest way to handle a multi-candidate ballot, but we leave that issue to the experts. We will show you how a single, open election will better achieve the Gov benefits of increased voter turnout, reduced partisanship, and improved quality of electoral officials and hence of government, because it does something open primaries and the Gov case do not do, minimize the influence of political parties.

This greatly simplifies Opp's case. Gov says we benefit from opening primaries to more voters; Opp says we benefit more from opening elections to more candidates and more voters. The clash fits into a sentence that is crystal clear. The complexities of ranked-choice voting fade into the background unless Gov chooses to bring them up, which places the burden of explaining the details to Gov.

Would I run this Opp case? Probably not. If I ask most people "Do you think we should have open primaries?" their most likely response is to compare them to closed primaries, not to an open general election. Open versus close primaries is the obvious issue in the motion. Gov is proposing a change; Opp is defending the status quo. There are good arguments for both sides.

Counterplans, even good ones, introduce complexity. Many judges don't understand counterplans or feel they are unfair. In this case, both sides are arguing for "open" elections, and Gov can make the argument suggested above that Opp is at the very least conceding a major part of the Gov case if not actually arguing in favor of the motion. Some judges may agree and vote Gov. For most judges, I think this counterplan tilts the odds against you.

Some Nits

I want to note a couple of small issues that I think are of interest.

“My Framework Is Net Benefits”

Telling the judge your framework is net benefits tells the judge nothing. I’ve never met a judge who favors voting for the team that supports the worst outcome.

The 2022 NPDL-TOC Jargon Guide defines “framework” as “A set of assumptions, definitions, perspectives, and evaluation methods for the round presenting by a side, often accompanied by justification for those choices”⁵. In other words, a framework explains to the judge what the important issues are and who they should decide whether the arguments around those issues favor Gov or Opp.

In this round Gov’s framework is “net benefits to all Americans especially with respect to values like democracy.” That’s a little better than plain net benefits, in that it suggests the debate is about democracy. But suppose they had said:

Gov believes you should judge this round by evaluating each side’s impact on democracy, as measured by the increase in voter turnout, the reduction in partisanship, and the quality of the candidates ultimately elected.

Better?

You Are Out of Time

The judges called the Prime Minister out of time when she hit 7 minutes 30 seconds. Clearly, she wasn’t watching the clock—no big deal, it happens—but I want to make a further point.

The speaking time for the PMC is seven minutes, with 30 seconds grace. Many debaters take that as an extra 30 seconds of speaking time. It is not. The 30 seconds grace is exactly that, time to finish your current thought gracefully without having a buzzer go off or someone shouting “Stop!”. It’s not an extra 30 seconds to present more arguments. I put my pen down at 7 or 8 or 4 or 5 minutes, so anything else never makes the flow.

Why does this matter? Recent politics in the United States and elsewhere demonstrate we need more than rules to have a reasonable and civilized society. We need a culture where we understand that there are things that you don’t do, even if they technically aren’t against the rules or you can get away with them. Some forms of debate in the United States have, in my opinion, been ruined by debaters speaking too fast or using technical arguments that don’t make—again in my opinion—for a good debater. I don’t think anyone can write or enforce a rule saying how fast debaters should speak, or what arguments should be valid, but we know it when we see (hear) it. It’s a matter of having a good debate culture.

How a speaker uses an allotted 30 seconds of grace is a matter of culture. Use it to end your speech gracefully, not because you’d benefit from an extra 30 seconds of argument.

⁵ See <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1NYNWxnEF9WI7P-FYWtEGw73URx12V--5pX5cWecEFKA/edit#gid=0>

A Missing Contention

I was quite surprised when the LO introduced his fourth contention. I had included his last comments under his second contention. Did he fail to signpost the third contention? Did he present it clearly and did I just miss it? Without a recording, I won't know. But the MG certainly heard it, as she named it in her constructive, and I used that to correct my flow.

It happens. We all miss things, and I am sure many details on my flow differ from yours. As a debater, be very sure to make your arguments clear, distinct and simple. As a judge, be generous in interpreting what you hear.

“According to the Packet”

In replying to the first Opposition contention on the impact of raiding in open primaries, the MG said, “according to the packet raiding usually fails.” The packet is not an authority. Citing the specific article in the packet is better in that it at least puts someone behind the claim. In this case I presume it was the last section of the Washington Post article which starts on page 5 of the packet and ends on page 6: “In past research, political scientists and economists have found that strategic crossover voting hasn't made much difference in how elections turn out.”

But quoting and authority is still not an argument. It only becomes an argument when you attach a warrant:

- *Claim: “raiding” or strategic crossover voting, usually fails.*
- *Warrant: The first hurdle is to organize enough voters to switch their registration to another party. The second is to get them to show up and vote on election day. The third, since you aren't likely to change the vote by much, the race must be a close one.*
- *Impact: It's rare for an election to satisfy all three conditions, so the impact on who gets elected is likely to be small.*

That is an argument.