

impact comparison, the weighing of impacts beyond taglines, and more meaningful engagement with "low magnitude" impacts. Debaters, after all, intend RoB argumentation to be a way to evaluate competing impact stories, but the phrase is rarely supported through argumentation or comparative analysis of the costs and benefits of competing debate styles. Impact framing has, more often than not, allowed debaters to read evidence and offer analytic arguments about competing debate styles, orientations, and impacts that have helped judges indeed decide who does the *best debating*.

As a debate coach who judges many debate rounds where debaters make role of the ballot claims, I am concerned about one of the more common roles of the ballot articulated in policy debate rounds: "the role of the ballot is to vote for whoever does the best debating." It is certainly true that RoB argumentation does not happen in every policy debate round. If both teams are going for multiple nuclear war scenarios, then a RoB argument about utilitarianism seems superfluous. RoB arguments are most common in performance or critical (kritikal) debates as well as in what debaters, coaches, and critics/judges describe as "clash of civ(ilization)s debates." A minor but significant digression: I have issue with the term *performance* as a modifier for debate. All debate is performative. Some performances are better than others depending on the metrics used. Performance debate is used, often as a pejorative, to distance traditional styles of debate with different styles of debate. That misses the point of the debate activity and reduced persuasion and argumentation to antiquated neo-Aristotelean notions of rhetoric. This idea of a clash of civilizations is also problematic in that it relies on Samuel P. Huntington's (1993) racist and Islamophobic article, "Clash of Civilizations?" When debate community members use that term to describe debates where debate teams utilize different styles they not only explicitly *other* one of those styles (seemingly always the team that does not do traditional policy debate) but also implicitly build walls between debaters as well as debaters and coaches/critics/judges.

Some of the arguments I make in this article are arguments with which many will be familiar (that the role of the ballot is central to debate, that the role of the ballot describes what a judge can do and what effect the judge's decision has in and perhaps outside of the debate, etc.). But, I add to this discussion an argument for doing away with the best debating standard because it fails to establish criteria for evaluating a debate round and often functions either to mystify critics/judges (producing an adverse judgment to the team proffering the *best debating* claim) or act as a signal to vote for the team that says RoB first (a phenomenon observable even in varsity late elimination rounds when listening to a critic/judge's oral critique). My thesis is, essentially, that when debaters say, "the role of the ballot is to vote for whoever does the best debating," they are saying both everything and nothing, and this practice is unhelpful for the activity and its participants.

The role of the ballot, generally

The role of the ballot is an important argument that can take many forms. Debaters might theorize the ballot to be equivalent to signing a bill into law, an intellectual endorsement of a particular argument, a personal referendum, a personal endorsement, or many other identificatory strategies including evaluating who best deconstructs, opposes, or rejects colonialism, settler colonialism, racism, anti-blackness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, as well as endorsements of various strategies or orientations like black spirituality, decolonization, socialism, deep ecology, etc. (see Strait & Wallace, 2008, pp. 22-24). It is, of course, important to frame the debate for the critic/judge because regardless of judging philosophies, critics/judges want to be told through what lens or lenses a round is to be put.

Evaluating debates is difficult. How is one to decide whether starvation in the United States is worse than starvation in Albania? How is one to decide between rejecting anti-blackness or patriarchy? If a permutation or two is in the round, then how should one decide between some combination of the Affirmative plan and the criticism (kritik) or the kritik on its own? These are decisions critics/judges face in many rounds, and the answers are not easy. It seems reasonable then, that debaters should argue about how the critic/judge should evaluate the round. This usually occurs by making a role of the ballot claim that debater signifies in their speech with a sentence beginning, "The role of the ballot is."

The role of the ballot addresses a related question, namely "What does signing a ballot do or mean?" Anyone in the debate activity for a while has seen the ways in which debate has empowered students, coaches, and critics/judges to challenge the world around them. Sometimes that involves challenging patriarchy, racism, or Islamophobia in the debate round or among the debating public and sometimes that means taking one's experience in debate and putting it to work in the world to effect social change. But, in what ways does the ballot affect any of this? There are basic answers such as a ballot signifies a win or a ballot is a comparative assessment of two argumentative strategies. There are, of course, more complex answers as well: the ballot is a pledge of ally-ship with an argumentative strategy, arguers, or world orientation or the ballot is a petition delivered to the debate community demanding a specific change.

These are all important questions in a world where participants in the debate activity no longer focuses on the tired tropes of roleplaying and policy change, but instead have begun and continue to think about the ways the debate activity can be meaningful beyond debating about public policy change, and indeed beyond one's participation in the activity. Beyond participant sentiment, arguments about the debate activity and what matters in it are also important for critics/judges so that they may feel as though they are doing something when they sign (or email in) a ballot because critics/judges should feel

some sense of agency, that they are in fact participants in a debate round and not simply passive, disinterested observers.

Criticisms of "The role of the ballot is whoever does the best debating."

There has been a rise in the college debate activity of this specific RoB. That must stop. My first objection is that the statement quite obviously applies to every debate round ever argued. A critic/judge is always trying to assess who does the best debating. Michael J. Ritter (2013) reminded scholars, debaters, coaches, and critics/judges that "even when there is a 'point-for-point and warrant-for-warrant' debate, many judges will vote based on who does the better job (technically speaking) extending and explaining the argument (even if the argument is atrociously absurd)" (p. 23-24). This analysis suggests that the best debating standard can be applied in at least a few ways. Critics/judges are clearly asked to evaluate the *best debating* no matter what type of debating they critique or judge. Sometimes the best debating standard, however, produces ridiculous or unsavory results. If critics/judges were not attempting to decide who does the *best debating*, one might not need a critic/judge in debate rounds at all. And, just like critics/judges in other activities attempt to deduce the best figure skating, cake baking, high diving, or lumberjacking, so too do debate critics/judges attempt according to some metrics decide who does the *best debating* regardless of what debaters' argumentative strategies are.

The better question is, "What metrics will the critic/judge use to evaluate the current debate round?" Unfortunately, *whoever does the best debating* does nothing to help the critic/judge get there. It suggests no metrics and provides no guidance to critics/judges. This is why teams that propose this RoB are occasionally disappointed when the other team wins. A critic/judge might very well agree and subsequently vote for the other team as the team that *does the best debating*. Every team, participating in every form of competitive academic debate, in the country could argue that this RoB works for them. Whether debaters run counterplans and disadvantages, topicality and framework, or kritiks, narrative analysis, and dance, all could claim they have done the *best debating* and deserve to win on the ballot. This RoB is not helpful for anyone.

One of the major reasons for this is that language is imprecise. *Best* and *debating* are terms debaters and critics/judges can easily contest. In fact, if one were to pick a group of several debate activity participants, it seems likely that there would be considerable disagreement about defining these words. This is because words are imprecise by their very nature. Fernand de Saussure (1916 [1983]) asked scholars to think of the "arbitrariness of the sign" (p. 73). A problem with the arbitrariness of words/signs is that they are open to many, often times unfathomable and sometimes unthinkable, interpretations. Imprecise roles of the ballot avail themselves to being

filled in by critics/judges in ways debaters might not appreciate. The *whoever does the best debating* standard falls victim to imprecision, which often results in critics/judges making arguments the debaters did not.

This imprecision does open up avenues for deeper warrant-level debating, and debaters ought to pursue this debating. Rather than repeat *best debating* in every speech, debaters should move away from this claim (which is quite obvious) and toward the strategies the critic/judge should use to decide the *best debating*. The impression of best debating allows debaters the opportunity to articulate methods and theories for doing just that. A debater might argue that the best debating is done by the team that best advances anti-racism (Here, the debater offers a specific orientation toward something rather than vaguely mention debate.). That debater should then describe the ways in which a critic/judge can assess that (impact framing and analysis, evidence analysis, comparisons between presentations or readings, Aristotelian analysis, narrative fidelity, close textual analysis, critical race theory, or any number of theories and methods to assess speech acts). Then, the debater might explain the ways in which the other team or debater did not produce a performance that was as good. In the high-speed world of cross examination style debate, this level of specificity promises difficult to implement, but the tradeoff between points 10-15 on one's theory block might be eschewed for the sake of more engaging debate.

A second problem is that *role of the ballot* has become an ultimate term pointing obliquely to some higher order. This is to say, that some critic/judges conflate *role of the ballot* with either best policy option or best identity-based advocacy. To the extent that the phrase *role of the ballot* signals critics/judges to check in for a set of argumentative presuppositions, the *best debating* standard can be strategically deployed as a *role of the ballot* to strategic dominance. Depending on the sanctioning body, tournament, style of debate, and judge, many might admit (although not publically) that the phrase *role of the ballot* has this screening effect. I base this argument on informal discussions with Directors of Debate, Assistant Coaches, Graduate Assistant Coaches, critics/judges, Tournament Directors, and debaters at all levels of competitive success and experience. This anecdotal evidence, and lack of quantitative data, is important because it highlights the difficulty in reckoning with bias or predispositions for and against certain arguments and strategies. While debaters and scholars have long moved past *tabula rasa* as a theory of critic/judge objectivity, they have much work to do in having critics/judges openly identify their biases for certain types of claims and arguments.

Ian Haney López (2014) might consider the phrase an example of dog whistle politics, or phrases that perform a coded function (Vote for me!) by resonating with particular groups. While López was writing about racial coding in public policy appeals, his argument appeals equally to non-racially coded claims and arguments.

Increasingly, it seems as though making a RoB claim (and being the first in the round to do so) is a sufficient reason to win a debate round. Richard M. Weaver (1953) argued that ultimate terms carried with them a particular force "a power transmitted through the links of a chain that extends upward toward some ultimate source. The higher links of that chain must always be of unique interest to the student of rhetoric" (p. 211). The RoB has become an ultimate term, one that points toward some ultimate source, and encourages immediate intellectual engagement, and usually the affirmation of one team regardless of what else might be happening in a debate round. Weaver thought there were two categories of ultimate terms, god and devil terms, those that conjured up in the listener or reader good feelings and those that conjured up bad feelings, respectively. Whether a critic/judge views the RoB as a god term or a devil term is up to the individual, but my suspicion is that critics/judges generally fall into one camp or another. If nothing else, RoB argumentation gets stared, boxed, or bolded on the flow the way *moral imperative* or *decision calculus* once did.

Third, objectivity is not objective. If the RoB is designed to make critics/judges objective, it has failed and will always continue to do so. Most people in the debate community no longer believe in the fictive world of *tabula rasa*, yet RoB argumentation often assumes the unstated belief that debaters can force a judge into some standard of objectivity. Objectivity is not monolithic and as J.L. Schatz (2013) has argued, following Donna Haraway, objectivity is constructed through lived experiences and claims about biases, interests, and preferences are in many ways more objective than claims that these have no impact on a critic/judge's ability to decide a round. So, rather than assume debaters can argue away a critic/judge's lived experience, debaters should accept that lived experience necessarily governs a critic/judge's decision-making and argue for specific impact analysis and comparison including educational objectives (promoting critical thinking, topic specific education, advocacy strategies, resistance strategies) and ways of framing impacts and assessing those educational objectives.

For example, in proclaiming a role of the ballot, debaters implicitly assume a critic/judge can be persuaded on what a ballot is, does, or can do. Reading judging philosophies, debaters and coaches know that is simply not true for many critics/judges—it is in their philosophies. It is also true that some critics/judges rely on equally confusing generalities about how they evaluate the *best debating*. Of course, impact framing is not a magic wand. Critics/judges do often describe, and increasingly so in the cross-examination style debate activity, in excruciating detail how they assess impacts and weigh arguments against each other. A critic/judge might indicate that they prefer *big stick* (high magnitude) impacts to systemic impacts. Another critic/judge might indicate an interest in uniqueness, inherency, and preference for short timeframe impacts, suggesting that debaters spend more time arguing about the timeframe in which

impacts will or will not occur. Impact framing moves debaters and critic/judges toward each other in understanding how critics/judges make decisions as well as improving everyone's recognition of bias.

In short, rather than have the phrase *role of the ballot* distract from the substantive content of a debate round, debaters should offer more meaningful engagements with evaluative schema through impact framing and analysis.

A Corrective to "The role of the ballot is whoever does the best debating."

When explaining what *better debating* is, debaters should focus on impact framing and analysis, which promises to direct attention to the specifics of the debate round and breadth of evidence (in all forms) debaters proffer. Ziegelmüller and Kay (1997) argued framing "offers[s] an overall perspective for evaluating competing claims," as well as that "[t]he use of framing remarks...focuses attention on those criteria the advocate hopes the decision-makers will use in arriving at a final judgment" (p. 242). These factors are precisely what the *best debating* RoB does not do. Impact framing denotes what is to be done (framing) and to what it is to be done (impacts).

If David Cheshier (Jan. 2001) is correct in his assessment, and I believe that he is, "Too often the very difficult task of weighing incommensurable values is sidestepped by even talented debaters, an outcome which only heightens the risk of seemingly arbitrary judge determinations," then it behooves debaters to weigh impacts regardless of roles of the ballot claims (p. 30). An imprecise role of the ballot encourages judge intervention because it does not provide reasonable guidance for decision-making. It also distracts everyone in the round from the impacts presented regardless of the impacts' timeframe, magnitude, and probability (not that this is the only way to evaluate impacts). The *best debating*, more often than not, provides a direction, but no path to get there.

By way of example, the Affirmative Team (AFF) in the 1st Affirmative Constructive offers spoken word poetry about rejecting structural racism by police. The Negative Team (NEG) offers a framework argument that indicates the AFF must offer a policy option for the critic/judge to vote on and also offers an argument about the spoken word poetry's relationship to the Resolution—a Topicality violation. Then, the 2nd AFF speaker argues that the role of the ballot is to vote for whoever does best addresses anti-racism. The 2nd AFF speaker then indicates how to evaluate anti-racism analysis (comparison of evidence, impact framing, argumentative fidelity, translatableness to outside the round action, etc.). The 2nd AFF speaker also provides examples of how the critic/judge could do these things ("The team that raises issues that prevent people of color from being killed in the world, which is an impact occurring while we debate, is doing the best debating about anti-racism." "Ask yourself what team helps the debaters in this round avoid impacts. I'm not afraid of being first

struck, but I am afraid of being shot when I pull my wallet out at a traffic stop." "Ask yourself if you went back to your community and read the 1A the 1N, which would interest people more?" "If anti-racism isn't central to the speech, then the NEG has done a worse job advocating for anti-racism." "If our authors represent different positionalities and their authors don't then you should vote for us because their evidence presentation is not anti-racist.").

The *best debating* standard simply does not provide any guidance for a critic/judge. Impact framing forces debaters to provide an evaluative schema for critics/judges. The type of weighing or how that weighing occurs, can take many forms. When debaters actually engage in impact weighing, and this is increasingly rare even in the highest levels of debate, debaters provide a framework usually based on or shaped by the standard timeframe, magnitude, and probability triumvirate. A critic/judge can easily apply framing, whereas the subjective, undefined *best debating* standard leaves the critic/judge rudderless at sea.

One way to correct for the vagueness of role of the ballot claims is to analyze impacts. Of course there are many different ways to analyze impacts, yet this should not deter debaters from this work. Better to do the work than risk critic/judge intervention or skew time allocation on a role of the ballot to which one's opponent easily agrees. What makes nuclear war a more significant impact than colonialism? What makes anti-blackness more urgent to address than small arms trade? What makes South China Sea (SCS) war or biological and chemical weapon warfare more probable than sexism or anti-trans violence? When debaters start grappling with these questions, debate rounds will turn into not competing claims, but deep argumentative communities about the nature of violence and the judge's role and responsibility to engage.

For example, using the SCS example, debaters might argue that the magnitude of biological of chemical war is far greater in terms of death than sexism. The team might offer as evidence the death tolls of previous chemical weapons attacks as well as experts predicting future death tolls. This argumentative strategy would ask the critic/judge to focus on magnitude. The other team might argue that the critic/judge can help solve for violence in the status quo, and that the better debating standard only applies to debates who address *real world*, not hypothetical violent scenarios. Here the critic/judge could weigh narratives of sexual violence against biological weapons war death tolls and assess who does the best debating by who makes the world safer now. This demonstration, oversimplified of course, demonstrates how filling in the *best debating* standard with strategies to assess just that can be helpful for critics/judges.

Doing away with or at least reconceptualizing *the role of the ballot is to vote for whoever does the best debating* promises to encourage more meaningful engagement with critical and performance arguments.

One of the most defeating, depressing, and degrading situations in debate is when debaters present passionate, well-argued, persuasive speeches that draw on lived experiences and address systemic violence and then never get to talk about those issues again as they are mired in framework and role of the ballot debate.

Focusing on impacts, on the violence of lived experience, promises more engagement with debaters' experiences, interests, and lives than ineffective and imprecise role of the ballot claims. Debate is about addressing violence, experienced or not, actual or potential. If, then, debate is about the prevention, acknowledgement, punishment, or necessary retributive action of violence (anti-blackness, homophobia, nuclear war, small arms war, etc.), then attending to those issues not vacuous claims about roles of the ballot that obscure impacts of all sizes and occurring in all spaces promises a better debate experience for everyone. Debaters should focus on the way violence occurs, how that violence relates to other forms of violence, how debaters can change, prevent, of challenge violence, and how the critic/judge can participate in supporting or opposing various orientations toward violence.

Earlier, several alternative roles of the ballot were mentioned. One way the *role of the ballot is to signify ally-ship with X team's strategy* might work is that the team could argue that the ballot is a petition to join a cause. Signing the ballot for a team would then be like signing one's name to a petition. This role of the ballot provides more guidance in redressing the violence indicated above. If team X can get enough allies, then the movement will really have support. The *best debating* standard does not address the question of violence, whereas the ally-ship standard frames the critic/judge's participation as affirming a certain political project. Likewise, debaters using the standard of *petitioning the community* standard might ask the judge to assess what their community or people like the debaters in the critic/judge's community might be most likely to support in order to end violence. This also produces a way for the critic/judge to assess competing claims and evaluate the warrants supporting addressing various forms of violence.

Debaters will always and should always frame the debate. Critics/judges appreciate this work and it helps make deciding rounds much easier. Debaters should work to craft meaningful statements that do not fall victim to language's imprecision. "The role of the ballot is to vote for whoever does the best debating" unfortunately does just that. It is a statement with no content and risks the critic/judge assigning content to it that the debaters do not want. Instead, debaters should focus on impact analysis and comparison, which provides more precision for a judge to evaluate a debate round. Vacuous claims do nothing to advance the activity, and do not afford any debaters of any style or argumentative predilections the best chance for victory or a reasonable, strongly warranted oral critique by their critic/judge.

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