

## **Public Forum- Making Use Of The Coin Toss**

A unique aspect of Public Forum is that the tab room does not determine the sides and speaking orders before each round. As such, the pre-round coinflip can have a big impact on the debate. Let us explore the reasons for this and how expert debaters can use this knowledge to their benefit.

### **Speaking Order**

One of the options available to the team that wins the coin flip is to choose whether to speak first or second. But does speaking order really matter in Public Forum debate? That depends.

Consider that there is some advantage to speaking first. These ideas are the first ones to cross the judges' minds. Research has shown that in both debate and IEs, judges have a tendency to remember such arguments better than ones made in the middle of the debate.

However, that same research has also demonstrated that the same advantage exists when it comes to speaking last. Giving the last final focus gives debaters the final opportunity to provide concise analysis telling the judges why they should win the debate. And of course, a creative debater can contextualize that analysis in a way that makes their opponents wish they could respond, even though they are barred from doing so.

Are there any other structural advantages or disadvantages? Speaking second allows for a debater to clash in the first constructive, which can be somewhat beneficial. Whereas the team going first will not know what the other team will say. A very prepared team could have several

cases prepped out and then choose one based off of the content of the first team's constructive. So going second does make sense sometimes.

What about when a debater wins the coin flip? There is an opportunity cost to choosing to go first and last--that is abdicating one's ability to choose pro or con. In my opinion, the advantages to controlling what side of the resolution to debate on vastly outweighs the less tangible advantages of picking speaking order. There are two big reasons for this.

### **Side Bias**

First, consider the following two resolutions, both used in actual tournaments:

- 1) The United States Federal Government should replace the federal income tax with a federal value added tax. (NPDA Nationals, 2010)
- 2) Resolved: That the constitutional right of freedom of religion has wrongly evolved into freedom from religion. (NCFL Nationals, 2010)

The first resolution was an outround resolution at the National Parliamentary Debate Association's national tournament for college parliamentary debaters. Obviously, parliamentary is much different than Public Forum, but for our purposes it will work fine. What is noticed about the resolution? It is a fairly value-neutral statement. It does not ask whether taxes in general are good or bad. It merely forces the debaters to defend that one tax is more desirable than the other. There is a wealth of literature supporting both sides. All in all, a very debatable topic and a fair one at that. The outcome of the tournament

rounds support that conclusion - of the 32 debates that occurred, 15 were won by the government (pro), while 17 were won by the opposition (con). The balance was virtually even.

The second resolution was used at this year's NCFL Nationals. This resolution is much more problematic. First, the resolution is interesting, but horrendously worded. In order to win, the pro had to win three things:

1. That there was at one point "freedom of religion" in the U.S.
2. That there is now "freedom from religion" in the U.S.
3. That the change in question is "[wrongful]."

But the con only had to prove one of these to be false in order to win the debate. Hence, inequitable burdens. This skew was reflected both perceptually and results-wise. The con ended up winning the vast majority of debates, and in outrounds virtually every team that won the coin flip decided to go con. The formal name for this is side bias.

What is side bias? Simply put, side bias consists of factors which are external to the arguments articulated in a debate that give a debater an artificial advantage based solely on what side of the resolution they are advocating. A good analogy can be found in NFL football. When two teams go to overtime they use a sudden death format – first to score wins. Hence, there is side bias in that the team that wins the coin flip to determine who gets the ball usually elects to receive the kick, thus they have the first opportunity to score. The rules are biased in that team's favor. (It is worth noting that the league is exploring changes to this rule.)

Side bias is reflected in statistical trends that indicate that one side consistently has a materially higher winning percentage than the other for the duration of the period in which a given resolution is used. In other words, affirmative/pro side bias simply means that the affirmative wins more often than the negative. Negative/con side bias means that the negative wins more often than the affirmative.

The best resolutions, like the tax resolution above, have no side bias whatsoever. They favor neither the affirmative nor the negative, and over the course of an entire month's worth of tournaments the win percentage for each side rounds out to about 50% (plus or minus a percentage point or two). However, rarely is a resolution that straightforward; most have at least a degree of side bias. Being able to evaluate a resolution to observe any side bias is critical to adding an extra advantage. Debaters want to be on the right side of the resolution whenever possible.

### **Personal Strength**

Sometimes a debater's pro case is just going to be flat-out better than their con case. It happens, I know. When I did lay-style Policy Debate in high school I was almost unbeatable on the affirmative, but I found it somewhat harder to be negative. Although debaters should strive to make both of their cases equally powerful, sometimes they cannot do that. As such, on a resolution that does not have much side bias, debaters should probably go with whatever side they are more comfortable with for obvious reasons.

The coin flip might seem like a minor technicality, but in reality it can play a huge role in defining tournament success. Being able to win

even just one extra round per tournament because of knowledge of how the coin flip works can be all-important if one wants to consistently see their name up on that break sheet.