Debating Framework Arguments

What is a Framework Argument?

Occasionally, one team in a debate round simply blows their opponents out of the water. They win every argument in the debate, and the judge's decision at the end of the round is trivially easy. In the vast majority of policy debate rounds, however, both teams are winning some arguments, and the judge must decide which are most important.

There are a variety of criteria a judge could use for comparing the relative importance of different arguments, but most default to a **calculative framework**. That is, they calculate the advantages and disadvantages of the plan that the Affirmative team is proposing. This calculation is often quite literal: if a judge thinks there is a 75% chance of the plan solving for the Harms, thereby saving 10,000 lives, and a 5% chance of the plan causing the disadvantage, which would kill 1,000,000 people, she would vote Negative (.05 x 1,000,000= 50,000 lives lost versus .75 x 10,000= 7500 lives saved). Most judges are not bringing calculators to debate rounds, but whether they realize it or not, their default decision calculus usually looks something like this.

Although the calculative framework is the default way in which the average judge would evaluate a debate round, most judges would prefer to hear arguments from the debaters about the criteria they should use for comparing arguments, rather than defaulting to anything. Framework arguments try to convince the judge to evaluate the round in some other way, usually one that the team making the argument expects to be favorable to them.

What does a framework argument look like?

Impact comparison is such an important part of debate that it is never too soon in the round to begin arguing this point. The Affirmative's case should always be strategically constructed to set up future impact comparison arguments, but some teams go a step further and make a framework argument part of their first speech. These arguments give the judge a way to think about the round that hopefully will shape her first impressions of all future arguments as well as her final evaluation of the Affirmative plan. When framework arguments are in the 1AC, they are often in a separate Contention or Observation called an Underview.

However, there is no set structure for a framework argument, the way there is for a Disadvantage or a Topicality violation. What is necessary is simply an explanation of how the judge ought to evaluate arguments made during the round and some reasons for why this evaluative framework is best. Debaters must realize that they are arguing, not only against the calculative framework to which most judges will default, but also against some alternate framework that their opponents may propose in the next speech.

What are some examples of framework arguments?

One very common argument is about morality. Strictly speaking, the argument is actually about **deontology**, meaning that the judge ought to adhere to some moral rule regardless of the consequences. For example, the Affirmative might argue that torture is so immoral that it must be eliminated at all costs. Thus, even if the Negative has a substantial disadvantage, if the plan solves for torture the Affirmative team should win the round.

For a real world example of this argument, imagine a plan to abolish slavery proposed during a debate round in 1850's America. The Negative would have very good links to a Civil War Disadvantage, but the Affirmative might argue, very compellingly, that slavery ought to be abolished anyway, simply because it is wrong.

Or, an Affirmative team claiming to eliminate a racist policy that exists in the status quo might argue that racism ought to be rejected all costs. In other words, they are arguing that the judge should make her decision based on which team solves best for racism, rather than on which team's policy would save the most lives.

In the second example, the framework argument could be more complex, hoping to influence more than just how the judge weighs arguments at the end of the round. The Affirmative might argue that racism is so pervasive that every single argument made in the round is potentially influenced by it. In other words, Negative evidence intended to minimize the Harms would be unreliable because racism appears normal in a racist society.

How should debaters answer framework arguments?

When a team makes framework arguments, they *must* be answered. Giving the other team uncontested control how the judge evaluates the round comes close to conceding. For example, even if the Negative could convince the judge that the plan would lead to the destruction of the human race, the Affirmative would be able to say that the judge must act on moral considerations, regardless of the consequences.

Answering framework arguments can be as simple as defending the calculative framework. There are good reasons why it is the default way to evaluate policy, and the number of lives that will be saved or lost as a result of the plan is probably important to consider. It may even be possible that such considerations are important even within the framework the other team is proposing. For example, what is moral might well be what will save the most lives. Thus, even using a moral framework will lead the judge back to the calculative framework.

Another good offensive strategy is to contest the opposing team's arguments within their own framework. To continue with the morality example, the Negative could argue that the plan is not a moral action, or present their own disadvantages with morality-based impacts.