### The Most Potent Arrow in the Negative's Quiver: The Counterplan

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#### Overview

Welcome to the introductory essay on counterplans! You should be commended for doing the extra work to understand the positions and jargon necessary to improve. In many ways, all of these arguments are intuitive, they have just developed a vocabulary of short-hand that requires learning some of the concepts through the lens of debate theory. Do not be afraid, however, there is no universal rule-book on debate, let alone counterplans, so feel confident that you can defend arguments that make sense and refute your opponent. Debate is nothing other than a three-step process: listen to your opponent, respond directly to their argument, and show how that means you win the debate. You will find those three responsibilities are at the center of all refutation, including counterplan debates.

This essay is organized into four main sections, explaining what a counterplan is, outlining the burden of "competition," working through some of the different versions of counterplans, discussing how the CP may fit within a larger negative strategy, and preparing answering against common affirmative arguments. This is the top of the iceberg; however, so hopefully you will continue a deep dive after working through the basics and explore more ways to win debates by deploying counterplans on the negative.

#### What is a Counterplan?

A counterplan is a rival proposal or a "specific policy opposed to the implementation of the affirmative." In other words, a counterplan challenges the affirmative's contention that their policy is the best means of changing the status quo. Common counterplans in debate include the States CP, an argument that the 50 States and territories would be better implementing the plan than the USFG, counterplans that do some of the plan and argue that the remaining portions of the plan not implemented by the counterplan are bad (PICs), XO CPs that pass the plan through an executive order instead of using legislation, and CPs that put a condition on plan passage--something like having a 3rd party take a particular action or consulting with a third party to get approval. These are complicated to say the least and you should not worry about the minutia now--just know that a counterplan is a negative argument used to prove that a competing proposal is a better course of action than the plan alone.

The first meta-question that has to be considered before we get into the specific types of counterplans, is the idea of *fiat*. Fiat is usually discussed in terms of the affirmative plan because it is the "ability to imagine" that the plan is passed in (or through) the status quo, although known as the "present system" or "the current moment as things stand." In other words, fiat allows the affirmative to bypass questions concerning adoption of the plan--often presented by the affirmative as inherent barriers to the plan being passed in the status quo--such that the debate can be focused on whether the plan *should* be adopted (is it advantageous over the status quo?) rather than debating about whether the plan *would* or *could* be passed. Keep in mind, almost all debate resolutions, particularly policy resolutions, use the word *should*.

Thus, if fiat allows the affirmative to pass their proposal in the status quo and discuss the advantageous nature of that plan vs. the status quo, than the negative should have the reciprocal ability to imagine a competing proposal--if not, than the negative can only defend the status quo and the possibility for change is reserved to the affirmative. That may not be a fair or educational way to debate. That said, the affirmative could always defend the argument that the negative does not have the right to counterplan, that a debate between a topical plan and the status quo is a good one--if fiat comes from the word "should," the negative does not have that right--there is no "should not." Overall, however, the more compelling arguments will create a world for the negative that includes counterplan, albeit with some limitations. The theory debates over what counterplans are legitimate and why is an intricate one, you might as well start learning about it now. The key is to open space for negative counterplans that both effectively test a component of the plan and prove that the component being tested matters. Such a goal, assuming that the negative should be allowed to counterplan on some level, leads us to a conversation about the debate term, "competition." When talking about counterplans, the first question is, "How does the CP compete? What's the competition?"

#### Competition

If I were to advocate banning nuclear weapons based on the risk of accidental use and theft and you were to respond with this argument: "Sure, but we should provide community training for US police forces," I would logically respond with some sort of *non sequitur* argument--that the focus on police training is not connected and therefore does not refute the original proposition regarding nuclear weapons. In other words, many counter-proposals may simply be other ideas for change. These positions do not *compete* with the affirmative plan because they do not require a choice. Both sides can agree that both proposals are good ideas--there is no clash. You have said go to the store and I have said go to the movies. Unless there is a reason to *only* go to the store and not go to the movies or go to the store *and* the movies, the original proposition (I should go to the store) still stands.

So, what makes a counterplan compete? What does the counterplan have to prove such that adoption of the counterplan alone is better than the affirmative or a combination of the affirmative and the counterplan? The combination of the affirmative plan and the counterplan (and there are many variations of such a combination) is called a *permutation*. You need to learn about permutations and how to answer them--they are among the affirmative's favorite and most persuasive arguments against a majority of counterplans (as well as against many kritiks). In essence, the permutation is a way to "do both." Do the plan and the counterplan simultaneously because the CP does not provide a reason to reject the aff--there is no competition between the two proposals as demonstrated by the permutation (many debate theorists will actually define the permutation as "a test of competition.").

To make our discussion more transparent, we are going to discuss a number of counterplans connected to this resolution: Resolved: Ellen should go to the store to buy some food. The competition question is whether the CP by itself is better than a combination of Ellen going to the store to buy food along with the CP. And, remember, permutations may be a bit more sophisticated than simply "do both." Other perms are "intrinsic perms" which add a third element to the advocacy, "severance perms" which do less than all of the plan or less than all the of the CP within the combination, "timeframe perms" which attempt to advocate a particular sequence such as "do the plan first, then the CP" or "do the CP first, then the plan." Not only do these perms need to have a net benefit--which we will explain momentarily--they also need to be defended as theoretically legitimate (based in something like predictability, literature, education, fairness, etc.). Other popular permutations (or phrases that get filled in later) include the "do the counterplan and all the non-competitive parts of the plan," or, even more bold "permute: do the counterplan," which seems to let the affirmative steal the CP without doing any of the original aff plan.

Now that a lot of the vocabulary is out there on the table, we can boil this entire question down to what is called "Net Benefits." "Net Benefits" is a theory of debate competition that helps to simplify the idea of competition and the permutation debate by contending that the overall advantages of the counterplan by itself have to outweigh the advantages of the plan or the permutation. There are many theories of competition circulating through the debate community and a few decades ago there was a vigorous dispute over the best theory to use. Among the options was "Mutual Exclusivity" (the plan and the counterplan are incompatible--they go in opposite directions), "Philosophical Competition" (the underlying ideology of the counterplan is at odds with the plan), "Redundancy" (why solve the same problem twice?), and even the extremely difficult to defend "Plan-Plan" theory (let's just weigh our advantages against theirs and forget about the permutation debate).

Those are rough characterizations and those theories of competition do have some potential merit and can be defended. The one that has seemingly prevailed over time, however, is the notion that the advantage of the counterplan not only has to outweigh the advantage of the plan, it has to outweigh the advantages of doing *both* the plan *and* the counterplan--that's how it competes. There are lots of ways to set this up, but the standard CP shell in the 1NC looks like this:

We (conditionally) advocate the following counterplan text: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I. Theory. This counterplan is legitimate and predictable because...

II. Solvency. The counterplan solves (the case...maybe even better). Evidence provided.

III. Net Benefits. DAs the CP avoids, etc. Answers to the perm(s).

#### Types of Counterplans

You should know that these are definitions rather than deep descriptions of each type. Do not worry as much about placing a counterplan into a particular category as you do the specifics of the counterplan in the round. Many counterplans are combinations of multiple genres--you have to determine what part of the plan the counterplan is testing and how that test is being deployed by the net benefit of the counterplan.

*Agent CPs*

Any counterplan that tests the agent of the resolution falls into this category. Who is doing the plan? What institutions/organizations/agencies are implementing the plan? In terms of our example, counterplans would test whether Ellen should be the one to go to the store and buy food. Maybe a robot should? Maybe Ellen's brother, Hidalgo, should? Maybe Uber eats? The negative might counterplan to NOT have Ellen do the plan, but have someone better, more importantly, have someone better do the plan compared to Ellen and that same person *both* going.

There are a LOT of Agent Counterplans in debate--the Executive (XO) or the SCOTUS can do the plan if the aff is attached to the legislature. A small executive agency might make internal rules to effectuate the plan and avoid the politics DA. Other forms of the Agent CP might be an actor in contrast to the USFG--using the Fifty States and Territories, for example, or using the United Nations, NATO, localities, private business, etc. The idea is to prove that the counterplan's agent acting in tandem with the plan's agent would be worse than the CP by itself.

*Advantage CPs*

Sometimes the counterplan appears at first blush to be non-competitive because it uses some other status quo mechanism to solve for one of the aff. advantages and then turns the other. The net benefit comes from the turns to the advantage that the aff tries to solve--this counterplan functionally makes the debate about one of the justifications for doing the plan.

*Uniqueness CPs*

These counterplans are designed to make a particular disadvantage unique. Thus, even though the DA might link to the status quo, the counterplan can avoid it and the aff cannot. In the store example, if the negative wants to read a DA that says "we should not support stores, every time we support a store, we are killing the planet." Well, that DA links to the aff that Ellen should go to the store, but it also links to the status quo. A CP that bans all stores might compete with the aff and would definitely make the DA unique. The question is whether the neg can get a link to the particular store that Ellen frequents because the aff should be smart enough to permute by banning all the stores except the one Ellen is going to visit.

*PICs*

These are popular counterplans and come in many shapes in sizes. The idea of a PIC, falsely labeled as a "Plan Inclusive Counterplan," is that the CP does most of the aff but NOT all of it. Then the negative argues that the remaining part of the affirmative plan that the CP does not do would be a bad idea. If you believe that the aff plan is defined by its effect, a PIC would do slightly less than the plan in function ("functional competition"). If you believe that the aff plan is tied to the text of the plan ("textual competition"), the PIC would strike (or redact) particular words or phrases from the plan. There is a debate about whether such a PIC can replace the text that has been erased with something else without opening the door to more permutations.

The PIC arguments are plentiful. You can see the possibilities in the "Ellen should go to the store" example in that if Ellen goes to the store to buy apples *and* oranges in the plan text the PIC might have Ellen go to the store and only buy apples based on the argument that apples satisfy her need for food and oranges cause an allergic reaction. In sum, the PIC says that if the aff does A, B, and C, a viable counterplan should be to do A and B in order to debate if C is good or bad.

*Conditions/Consultation/Delay CPs*

There are a number of counterplans that will add a period of time before implementing the plan. In some cases, these counterplans will add a time element and process that means the plan will not get done--both are possibilities. Three main examples come to mind. The first is the conditioning CP which argues that a certain condition must be met by a third-party or the focus of the plan *before* the plan is implemented.

This works well when the affirmative is designed to improve relations with another entity because the conditions will then most likely be met. In other words, there are strings put on the plan through the counterplan and the debate is about whether or not the plan should be implemented immediately. A similar kind of plan would consult with another entity before doing the plan. In some cases, the consult CP will potentially do a third thing based on the results of the negotiations. Other forms of this CP will consult and use a veto power such that the entity being consulted can say yes or no to plan.

The third type of time manipulation counterplan is just that: the delay counter plan. It says that something important is coming in the status quo requiring us to wait and it would be better for us to hold off on the plan until this upcoming event takes place and do the plan later. If we take a look at the topic that asks whether Ellen should go to the store to buy food you can substitute three examples above.

The consultation counterplan would consult with Ellen’s parents or friends before she goes to the store to buy food. The conditioning counterplan, often called conditions, would argue that someone else should satisfy a certain condition before Ellen goes to the store or that Ellen should ask another entity to satisfy a certain condition before she goes to the store. The delay counterplan would have Ellan wait to go to the store until a certain event transpires.

*Solvency / Case Specific CPs*

The specific case counterplan or solvency mechanism counterplan argues that there is a better process available to achieve the goal of the aff. In the instance of the "Ellen should go to the store and buy food" resolution, one of these counterplans might argue that she should go to the store but steal the food instead. She should save the money and she won’t get caught. Another version would have Ellen go to the store and eat food in the isles as opposed to buying the food. The point is to center the debate on a particular solvency mechanism.

*Offset CPs*

The offsets counterplan basically argues that the resolution is defined by the verb and the negative has the ability to counterplan in the opposite direction. If the resolution says to increase a particular process, the negative can decrease that process overall and argue that the net reduction in the object of the resolution is the opposite of the affirmative in essence. The key to the offsets counterplan is the argument that the resolution has an anti-topic and that if the affirmative can be done in tandem with an opposite action (such that the net of the two actions is the opposite of the resolution), then the negative should win. This counterplan works well with a directional verb and against smaller affirmatives.

#### Conclusion

There are many other types of counter plans to consider but this is a fairly comprehensive list that should help you get started. Work hard on developing counterplans that help your larger strategies, predict the responses the affirmative is likely to make and write arguments against those positions. The more you work on specific counterplans, the more success you will have on the negative.